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Antiwar Literature In The United States Since 1945

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ANTIWAR LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1945

by

KELLY ROY POLASEK

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

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INTRODUCTION

All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry.
John Ashbery¹

This dissertation examines literary resistance to US militarism since 1945. In this “postwar” period, the US has been involved in a series of wars and military interventions that overlap to cover nearly the entire 75-year timeline, and as a result, US citizens have been continuously implicated in war in some form or another—whether as patriotic soldiers or reluctant taxpayers.² And yet, throughout the postwar period, many people in the US have refused to consent to the wars waged by the nation they “belong” to, in various ways and to various degrees. One of these modes of war resistance is antiwar literature. I maintain that a requirement of antiwar literature is a disruption or break from the pro-war narrative that seeks to justify and normalize these wars; literary works about war that do not deviate from this narrative are simply war literature.

I argue that antiwar texts are not works of political quietism but are motivated on a fundamental level to bring antiwar subjects into being and, when possible, to contribute to existing antiwar movements (as with poetry and performances produced by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the subject of my second chapter). The tendency within existing criticism on antiwar literature is to look for the aesthetic value in texts considered “antiwar” but to dismiss (or at least downplay) their political significance. By contrast, I contend that attending to the antiwar aims of

¹ John Ashbery, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Nation*, 29 May 1967.

² See the Congressional Research Services report RL32170 on US military interventions, which have been nearly continuous since the nation’s founding. The report does not include “covert actions... the Civil and Revolutionary Wars [or] the continual use of US military units in the exploration, settlement, and pacification of the Western part of the United States.” Richard F. Grimmett, “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798 – 2009,” *Congressional Research Services* (27 Jan. 2010) archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170513130028/http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/crs/rl32170.pdf>.

these texts clarifies their specific uses of form and allows us to see how the antiwar project shapes literary form itself. Antiwar texts work through contesting existing ideologies and ways of feeling, ideological contestation in antiwar texts entailing the creation of new subject positions and new ways of relating to the state. For example (and to simplify), one might move from hating Japanese persons to sympathizing with them after reading John Hersey's *Hiroshima*.³ Obvious though it may seem, centering the antiwar project in an examination of *Hiroshima* is necessary if we seek to understand the structure of Hersey's text and its various formal devices for directing the attention and emotions of its imagined readers.

In sum, this dissertation aims to show how antiwar texts are motivated in their very design, in their formal principles, to oppose war. In doing so, I also argue that we cannot understand the specific formal principles at work in these texts unless we account for the ways in which those practices are motivated to contest given pro-war ideologies and structures of feelings—which have been the default in the US since at least 1945—or to inspire or sustain antiwar practices. This motivation is conveyed in a range of ways, attuned to historical context and generic affordances, and explicating these various methods of literarily representing an antiwar position and antiwar sentiment across different wars and via different literary genres produces a broader sense of what a political work of literature could be expected to do throughout this period of US history.

My study of US antiwar literature in this period features chapters on works of reportage, performance, poetry, and speculative fiction written, respectively: in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; during the anti-Vietnam War movement; in response to the “war on terror” in Iraq and Afghanistan; and from a future-oriented position that looks back on US history as one of an internal war on Black lives. This historical and generic

³ John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

expanse makes certain things evident that I would not have discovered had I focused my study on a single text or even a series of historically contemporaneous or generically homogenous texts (e.g., in a dissertation on anti-Vietnam War literature). In my examination of US literature since 1945 through the lens of antiwar literature, I reached the following historical and theoretical conclusions. The historical conclusion is that in the period of time from the end of the Second World War (1945) to the first two decades of the 21st century, US antiwar literature has demonstrated a continuing disenchantment with national politics alongside a skepticism about what literature does or can do in terms of political formation through aesthetic experience. The theoretical conclusion that my analysis in each chapter supports is that to be antiwar as a political position also requires the critique of the nation-state as a form and of state ideological formations around race, gender, and sexuality.

By “national politics,” I mean to refer broadly to established channels (e.g., voting in federal elections, legal forms of protest, petitioning one’s elected representatives) of appealing to or influencing the actions of political representatives, the waging of war being one such action, since war is bound up in the monopoly on organized violence that is unique to the state. Disenchantment with national politics entails a waning belief in the ability to effect change in such state-controlled aspects of public life, here primarily related to the military and state militarism. For example, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War initially sought to oppose the Vietnam War via electoral politics but became disillusioned when the candidate they supported, George McGovern, did not receive the 1968 Democratic nomination for President. As a result, they turned away from an attachment to national politics and instead engaged in forms of antiwar activism including grassroots community organizing and collective aesthetic practices such as “guerrilla theater” and literary publishing.

American War, Antiwar Literature

The constant and enduring quality of US military activity results from and reproduces a militaristic and militarized society. The US is a militaristic nation: an “imagined political community” wherein “warlike values” are prevalent.⁴ US society is also *militarized*, following Michael Geyer’s definition of militarization as the “contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence.”⁵ The cultural valorization of militaristic values and the practical organization involved in conducting a modern war both depend to some degree on the production and dissemination of pro-war propaganda, which aims to manufacture public support (or, at least, tolerance) for US wars. Pro-war propaganda seeks to justify the mass death, injury, and monetary expense of these wars. Americans have made sense of their personal and collective implication in US war in a number of different ways. Sometimes this implication is disavowed (this war has nothing to do with me), understood as a call to patriotic duty (which might take the form of enlisting in military service or renaming menu items based on their national connotations), or taken as a moral obligation to resist the war (as was the case for World War II conscientious objector Howard Scott, subject of Sarah Sentilles’s *Draw Your Weapons*).⁶

In the United States, opposing war may be more urgent now than ever *because* of the myriad ways war has altered and interrupted daily life and threatened life on the planet since the mid-20th century. In terms of “war” loosely defined as armed conflicts between modern states in

⁴ “Imagined political communities” references Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; New York and London: Verso Books, 2006) 6. I describe the US as militaristic based on the latter half of historian John Gillis’s definition of militarism as “either the dominance of the military over civilian authority, or, more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in a society”: John R. Gillis, ed. *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 1.

⁵ Michael Geyer, “The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945,” in John R. Gillis, ed. *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 79.

⁶ Sarah Sentilles, *Draw Your Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2017).

which soldiers are sent to kill and die, the conclusion of the Second World War marked the dawn of the atomic age, and the subsequent global proliferation of nuclear weapons ushered in a Cold War between the US and the USSR that led to the establishment of “proxy” warzones across the globe; those now remembered as their own wars are the Korean War, from 1950-53, and the Vietnam War, 1964-73. The US has also maintained significant military involvement in conflicts with and between Arab nations including Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. This includes the Gulf War, a brief “shock and awe” campaign led by the US in 1990-91 and the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan (beginning in 2001) and Iraq (2003). When we expand the criteria for the ways in which US militarism impacts modern life beyond the effects of official or unofficial armed conflicts, we can observe the “militarization of everyday life.”⁷ This is most obvious in the changes

⁷ “As many have argued, the Iraq and Afghanistan war years have seen a steady and sustained militarization of everyday life that stretches far into the economy, society, and culture (Bacevich 2005; Hedges 2003; Der Derian 2009; Engelhardt 2010; Mirzoeff 2005; Lutz 2009)”: Patrick Deer, “Mapping Contemporary American War Culture,” (49). The militarization of everyday life in the US is also apparent at the level of rhetoric, as militaristic language is frequently used in politics, healthcare/medicine, and sports, to name just a few arenas that might seem separate from war and yet are implicated in it at the level of shared vocabulary. One of the slogans of Joe Biden’s 2020 presidential campaign was, “we are in a battle for the soul of the nation”: “Battle for the Soul of the Nation | Joe Biden For President 2020,” *Joe Biden* (20 Aug. 2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHLcR_CSIsE. Announcements of the deaths of cancer patients are couched in terms of “hard-fought battles”; see: “The Language of Cancer,” *Rogel Cancer Center* (Spring 2019) <https://www.rogelcancercenter.org/living-with-cancer/advocacy/language-cancer>. The “result of this banal circulation of war rhetoric in the body politic, I would argue, can be a similar kind of confusion between a dominant militarism and a more plural and diffuse social processes of militarization”: Deer 54. In addition, the US military and US war culture is responsible for an uptick in white power violence in the US, gender-based violence (e.g., sexual assault in the military and domestic violence committed by veterans and police officers) and climate change. See Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) on the rise in veteran-led white power activity post-Vietnam War. Sharpe connecting migrant crisis to US wars in “Middle East.” The U.S. Department of Defense “has a larger annual carbon footprint than most countries on earth. With a sprawling network of bases and logistics networks, the U.S. military is the single biggest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world aside from whole nation-states themselves”: Murtaza Hassain, “War on the World,” *The Intercept* (15 Sept. 2019) <https://theintercept.com/2019/09/15/climate-change-us-military-war/>. For a review of statistics about reported instances of intimate partner violence experienced by veteran caregivers, see Corinne E. Hinton, “Unintended Consequences: Intimate Partner Violence, Military Caregivers, and the Law,” *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6.1 (July 2020) 211–225. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.166>. For federal reporting on sexual assault in the US military, see “Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2019,” *United States Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response* (April 2020) https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/1_Department_of_Defense_Fiscal_Year_2019_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault_in_the_Military.pdf.

to policing in the past several decades (case in point: the “war on poverty” and the “war on drugs”), but the education and immigration system are also increasingly militarized in the US.

Although war might seem easy to oppose because the suffering involved is so immediately connected to its purpose,⁸ within such a saturated war culture, one difficulty with this task is that it can seem overwhelming or doomed to fail. In his study of antiwar literature, Giorgio Mariani references the philosophical writing on war and morality by Robert Holmes to say that “we are all against war, we all think wars are wrong, we are all opposed to violence . . . but very often we ‘proceed to say that although we all hate war, nonetheless, some wars are necessary to avoid greater evils. And in any event, there have always been wars and always will be, and you cannot change that unless you change human nature.’”⁹ Historian Margaret MacMillan takes a similarly defeatist position in her public history of war, concluding that “like it or not” war is part of human life.¹⁰

There is a long history of debates about war and the role literature plays in connection to it. For instance, the genre of the epic poem originated to extol the virtues of ancient Greek war culture, and in 19th and 20th century American literature about war, the experience of combat is mostly represented as a masculine rite of passage and as creating a uniquely strong community

⁸ Literary scholar and aesthetic theorist Elaine Scarry defines war as a contest to “out-injure” one’s opponent in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 63-64, 126. Formative military theorist Carl von Clausewitz posited that war has three “dominant tendencies,” the first of which is violence (the second being chance and the last, which Clausewitz scholar Peter Paret calls more of a wish than a reality, is the subordination of war to reason): Peter Paret, *Clausewitz in His Time: Essays in the Cultural and Intellectual History of Thinking About War* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014) 13.

⁹ Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War Against War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana, Chicago, & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015) x. In his examination of antiwar literature and theoretical writing, Mariani notes that “scholars sometimes refer to anti-war literature as a ‘subset’ of war literature, but I have never come across any sustained attempt to identify its contours, either from a morphological or philosophical point of view” (5).

¹⁰ “To say that war brings benefits and can help to build stronger, even fairer, societies is not to defend it. Of course we would rather improve our world, help the weak and unfortunate, or have advances in science and technology in a state of peace. Yet finding the will and the resources to make great advances is harder in peacetime; it is all too easy to put off doing something about poverty, the opioid crisis or climate change until another day. War concentrates our attention and, like it or not, has done so throughout human history”: Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (New York: Random House, 2020) 29.

bond among soldiers.¹¹ Yet there is always *some* disagreement about the degree to which literature has served to reinscribe pro-war ideals. Simone Weil argued that Homer's *Iliad* is an antiwar text despite its canonical status as a foundational work of (pro-)war literature. And while Mariani's is the only study of antiwar literature that focuses on what defines antiwar literature as such that I am aware of, others have written about literary opposition to war either explicitly or implicitly.

My study of antiwar literature builds upon and is indebted to existing scholarship on war literature and art that resists war, but it departs from theories that base their classification of a literary work as antiwar on its immediate, measurable political impact. An example of this vein of literary criticism is Lorrie Goldensohn's *Dismantling Glory*, which reads American soldier poetry from the 20th century from an implicitly antiwar position, evident from the title of the monograph.¹² Goldensohn views soldier poetry as the "most fertile ground for the exposure of both war and antiwar thinking" and goes on to say that, "in spite of massive continuities in feeling and approach to war making, many of these poems nonetheless can be seen as moving with conviction both direct and indirect towards peace witness."¹³ However, Goldensohn's assertion of an antiwar quality in twentieth century soldier poetry is ultimately tempered: "Representing the horror of war is not the same thing as committing oneself or others to ceasing its practice" because "horror is an amazingly elastic sensation."¹⁴ Kate McLoughlin's formalist examination of Western war literature concludes with the slogan "make lit, not war." With this slogan, McLoughlin suggests that authors of war literature may do antiwar work by warning readers of the horrors of war, but she then immediately neutralizes "make lit, not war" as an antiwar slogan by characterizing it as

¹¹ Michael C. C. Adams, "'Anti-War' Isn't Always Anti-War," *The Midwest Quarterly* 31.3 (Spring 1990) 297-313, 300.

¹² Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

¹³ Goldensohn 8, 41. She adds that the poems' "mode of war resistance" was enabled and shaped by both technological and formal innovations (41).

¹⁴ Goldensohn 41.

“nothing less than an act of good citizenship” that nonetheless “is not the same as the actual prevention of future armed conflict.”¹⁵ Making much the same distinction with regard to reading war literature as Goldensohn made about war poetry, McLoughlin not only forecloses the possibility of an antiwar reading practice but also goes on to poo-poo the possibility of war literature containing antiwar potential, instead proposing that war literature has healing properties for both reader and writer.

Of course, the literary works I analyze did not themselves start antiwar movements. Unlike Goldensohn and McLoughlin, I posit that a work can be labelled antiwar literature even if it has not (yet) demonstrably yielded antiwar practice.¹⁶ My interest is in how the aim of participating in the political project of moving people to oppose war shapes the literary form of a text. The key thing, in my view, is that these works strive to counter or supplant pro-war ideological formations and structures of feeling with ways of thinking and feeling against war—even if they fail, indeed, even if success is impossible. Regardless of the immediate outcome of works of antiwar literature, none can stand for political quietism. Antiwar literature as I am defining it is politically motivated, either from a nationalistic attachment that is motivated to reform Americanness or from a revolutionary standpoint that contests the hegemonic (pro-war) ideology and structure of feeling *because*, from this perspective, there are no solutions within the current (national) order.

¹⁵ Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 190.

¹⁶ War scholar-poet Philip Metres makes a claim about judging the success of peace movements that I find helpful for thinking about the work of antiwar literature: the “success of the peace movement ought not to be measured by whether or not it stopped a war; rather, its impact, however decentralized or marginal, must be registered in the constancy of its witness to the evils of warfare and its resistance to the smooth functioning of an imperial, militaristic culture of war”: Philip Metres, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Home Front Since 1941* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007) 8. More generally, I find persuasive and heartening Kara Keeling’s take on Robin D.G. Kelley’s definition of movement success: “Kelley argues that, when measured according to whether they changed society’s basic structures, none of the ‘freedom dreams’ movements he discusses was successful; yet, when accounted differently, each generated visions of the world that continue to feed and inspire others”: Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019) xv.

McLoughlin ends her book with the argument that war literature has productive emotional potential (it “recommends love”¹⁷) but positions this emotional potential in opposition to a political antiwar function. I propose instead that the emotional power of war literature—the feelings it may be able to solicit from its readers—is inextricable from its contribution to an antiwar political project.

Antiwar literature invites the imagined readers of a given text to recognize themselves as being against war; with such a change in one’s understanding of oneself as a subject of the US, the narrative that one believes about the war also changes. In order to open up such new ideological formations—to allow for the reader to recognize themselves otherwise in relation to war—works of antiwar literature challenge the pro-war narrative that is being forwarded by the government with the help of the mass media (an ideological state apparatus).¹⁸ So, for example, in the historical moment following the September 11, 2001 attacks, when the Bush administration proscribed nuance in an effort to encourage US citizens to recognize themselves as patriots in favor of a “war on terror,” Rob Halpern’s poetry collection *Common Place* embraced nuance of a particularly discomfiting type as part of its antiwar ideological contestation.¹⁹

The narrator of US Iraq War veteran author Phil Klay’s short story “War Stories” states, “nothing’s an antiwar film...There’s no such thing.”²⁰ This position gets at a paradox of war

¹⁷ McLoughlin 192.

¹⁸ Mariani, too, asserts that antiwar literature by definition must challenge or disrupt the pro-war narrative; he finds the definition of antiwar writing in Cynthia Watchell’s *War No More*—as either questioning the morality of war or de-romanticizing it—to ultimately “carry virtually no cognitive value whatsoever” (15). Mariani’s criticism here lines up with Iraqi author and scholar Sinan Antoon’s critique of recent war writing, noting specifically that Brian Turner’s poems in *Here, Bullet* (2005) “did not challenge or problematize, in any way, the reigning official narrative of and about the war. They did represent the visceral violence of the war, of course, but they never questioned the genealogy of the war itself nor its ideological edifice”: Sinan Antoon, “Embedded Poetry” *Jadaliyya* (June 11, 2014). Antoon goes on to note that although the 2008 film *The Hurt Locker* similarly “parrots the official narrative (we went to help them, but are trapped there) and never question’s [sic] the war’s genealogy or its legitimacy,” it “was hailed as an anti-war film.”

¹⁹ Rob Halpern, *Common Place* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015)

²⁰ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014) 234. Anthony Swofford’s Persian Gulf War memoir *Jarhead* elaborates a similar point: “Vietnam films are all pro-war...Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San

literature: antiwar writing represents war to some extent even as it critiques it.²¹ Simply representing the violence of war is not enough to be considered antiwar, a point upon which I am in agreement with Mariani, Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, and Michael C. C. Adams, whose “‘Anti-War’ Isn’t Always Anti-War” critiques the lack of distinction between realistic literary portrayals of the violence of war and antiwar literature, which he defines as requiring “consistent opposition to the degradation of man killing man as a way of resolving differences.”²² Poet-scholar and US Iraq war veteran Roy Scranton looks at the literary representation of soldiers in a similar vein, pointing out instances where a description of traumatic experience is oftentimes read as an antiwar critique without any demonstration of a challenge to war as an idea in general or to the official state narrative in its meaning, purpose, or content. What Scranton terms the “trauma hero myth” “dominates critical and scholarly interpretation of war literature, war movies, and the visual culture of war” and “serves a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy.”²³ Such a scapegoat function is opposed to an antiwar function because it makes war acceptable or inevitable and leaves the US blameless. Scranton shows that it is not necessary for a text to espouse pro-war propaganda for it

Francisco or Manhattan will watch the films and weep and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Station and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills”: Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 6-7.

²¹ As Mariani puts it, the “war novel may well criticize...the emptiness of an older martial rhetoric, but it can do so only by resorting to a new rhetoric that will inevitably be in a relation of *both opposition and proximity* to war” (19, emphasis in original).

²² Adams 303. Adams argues that the trench poets of World War I and modernist writers including Hemingway and Faulkner, whom he views as the most popularly associated with antiwar sentiment in Anglophone literature, are not actually antiwar writers due to their ambivalence toward war violence, their characterization of soldiers as victims rather than perpetrators of war, and their direction of much of the rage that is interpreted as antiwar toward women and peacetime society, neither of which Adams takes to be legitimate targets of antiwar feeling. He holds up as examples of “uncompromisingly anti-war books” *Johnny Got His Gun*, *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* (312).

²³ Roy Scranton, “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to ‘Redeployment’ and ‘American Sniper’” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (January 25, 2015).

to nonetheless oppose or dissuade antiwar feeling, concluding that “understanding the problem of American political violence,” a formidable task, but one the antiwar texts I examine in this study attempt to take up, must entail “recognizing soldiers as agents of national power, and understanding what kind of work the trauma hero is doing when he comes bearing witness in his bloody fatigues.”²⁴ My second chapter shows how Vietnam Veterans Against the War dramatized veterans as “agent-victims” of the Vietnam War; in doing so, they forwarded a theory of what an antiwar stance requires that is totally in line with Scranton’s. Scranton, Antoon, Mariani, Adams, and I agree that readings of the antiwar potential of literary objects must be concerned with the ways in which the texts speak back to dominant narratives about war. I extend the aforementioned arguments, most directly Mariani’s call for a wider and more rigorous account of antiwar literature, by simultaneously broadening and detailing the definition and stakes of antiwar literature.

Ideological Contestation & the Emotional Habitus

Historian Aaron William Moore writes that World War II-era “wartime debates did not necessarily challenge the assumption that civilians *should* be killed, but rather *how openly the government should announce this in front of their own civilian population.*”²⁵ The literary texts analyzed in this dissertation all reveal the hegemonic state narratives of their respective wars to be concerned with ideology, or how citizens of a nation should be encouraged to make sense of the war and their individual relation to it, rather than with communicating military policy (actions that would or would not be taken, how they aligned with internationally accepted “rules of war,” etc.). Works of antiwar literature, then, actively contest the pro-war narratives of the state with their own

²⁴ Scranton describes how Phil Klay’s short story “Redeployment” does the opposite of enabling antiwar feeling by “open[ing] up an emotional conduit for those readers to feel the pang of grief that can come with killing, but without having to connect that feeling to the political reality of the war in Iraq.”

²⁵ Aaron William Moore, *Bombing the City: Civilian Accounts of the Air War in Britain and Japan, 1939–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 208, emphasis mine.

narratives of war, offering alternative ways of thinking and feeling about the war and the nation itself. My definition of what makes literature “antiwar” is based on its refusal of political quietism; that is, its challenge of the hegemonic narrative around war in the US since 1945, which has been that war is an acceptable and/or inevitable aspect of the daily lives and identities of Americans. Antiwar literature challenges this pro-war norm (which is either aggressive or passive and seemingly neutral) through ideological contestation and the proposal of new emotional habituses.

While the “natural” state or baseline mode of social-being with regard to war has long been a matter of disagreement for political theorists,²⁶ what is not in question is the requirement of the nation-state to produce subjects who are willing to participate in warfare, whether in the role of self-sacrificing soldiers or supportive home front citizens providing material and emotional support to the war effort. Randall Jarrell’s well-known poem, “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” illustrates the way subjects are produced to serve the state and are made disposable by war:

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.²⁷

Pro-war persuasion is a key part of a nationalist ideology formation, if ideology is understood as the social force that produces societal consent for the purpose of reproducing current power relations. Marxist ideology theory, as elaborated by French philosopher Louis Althusser, posits that societies maintain and reproduce their class relations via a combination of repressive force

²⁶ Thomas Hobbes famously argued in his *Leviathan* (1651) that the state of nature was a “war of all against all,” which could only be subdued into a quasi-peace via the creation of the nation state, whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau took the opposite position and argued that the “true” state of nature was peaceful, with war a result of such community formation: Hans Jonas, Alex Skinner, and Wolfgang Knöbl, *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013) 20-22, 44.

²⁷ Randall Jarrell, “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1980) 144.

(military, police) and ideology (by way of ideological state apparatuses, such as schools, churches, families, and the mass media); those that strike a balance are stronger and more efficient than societies that rely on force to manage their populations. This is because ideology does the work of convincing people that the way things are—the current social order and their place in it—is natural, fair, or the best that can be hoped for.²⁸

The more local problem I am thinking about with ideological contestation in antiwar literature is how populations consent to be governed, which includes consenting to support war in various forms and to various degrees.²⁹ Pro-war ideology is what makes it possible for individuals to conceive of themselves as patriots willing to sacrifice their lives as soldiers on behalf of their country. A passage in Madeline Miller’s retelling of the *Iliad* from the perspective of Patroclus, companion of Achilles, describes ancient Greek ideology—wherein recognizing oneself as a “prince” bore with it the consequences of warring: “Our world was one of blood, and the honor it won; only cowards did not fight. For a prince there was no choice. You warred and won, or warred and died.”³⁰ In the US, nationalist ideology formation entails consent to support imperialist militarism and, relatedly, to accept American exceptionalism.³¹

²⁸ Ideology is a concept that encapsulates the “complex ways through which modern societies offer reciprocally reinforcing versions of ‘reality,’ ‘society,’ and ‘self’ to social subjects”: James H. Kavanagh, “Ideology” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. (1990; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 306-320, 310. “Ideology is a social process that works on and through every social subject, that, like any other social process, everyone is ‘in,’ whether or not they ‘know’ or understand it. It has the function of producing an *obvious* ‘reality’ that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced and did not need to be ‘known’ at all”: Kavanagh 312.

²⁹ Following on Althusser’s ideology theory, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall shifts the concept toward an emphasis on sovereignty and governance by folding in the concepts of hegemony and rearticulation (from Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci). Hall defines ideology as the “mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”: David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 26. Hall continues, the “effective coupling of dominant ideas to the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological struggle is *intended to secure*.”: Morley and Chen 44.

³⁰ Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles* (New York: Ecco, 2012) 221.

³¹ “As a discourse, American exceptionalism includes a complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which

No ideology ever gets everyone to completely consent; there are moments when it is less effective than others. All of the texts I examine are searching for weak points in the dominant pro-war ideologies of their historical moment. I analyze the ways in which the textual objects of this study contest existing ideologies that normalize war and make the inevitability of war seem obvious and irrefutable. For Stuart Hall, the purpose of ideology is to legitimize the rule of the ruling class and class relations; such legitimization sustains the power of the ruling class. The US government, in this theorization, exists to maintain class relations in US society. There is struggle involved because the coalition of power-holders, their ideas, and the connection between the two are never wholly settled—there is always room for contestation regarding how a society does or should operate and for the breaking and forming of ideological connections, or rearticulation.³² Rearticulation works to put concepts together; for example, citizenship and war are two concepts that are connected as part of pro-war ideology. What if these concepts were disarticulated in a literary work whose mode of address offered readers different points of identification, for example, helping them to see that contrary to what their government would have them believe, they could identify as Americans without hating Japanese people? This is what my first chapter argues that John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* encourages through its formal practices.³³

other nations aspire”: Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 7.

³² Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, whose own writing about ideology is extensive, glosses Hall’s concept of rearticulation as a “discursive struggle” in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London and New York: Verso, 2016) 6. Sociologist Cynthia Cockburn summarizes a global peace movement’s aims as “loosen[ing] the grip on our minds of the inevitability of war, the prevailing view of violence as natural and inescapable, and open[ing] them to the belief that, for the most part, we can choose to do things differently”: Cynthia Cockburn, *Antimilitarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 16.

³³ “Ideological analysis in literary or cultural study, then, is concerned with the institutional and/or textual apparatuses that work on the reader’s or spectator’s imaginary conceptions of self and social order in order to call or *solicit* (or ‘interpellate,’ as Althusser puts it, using a quasi-legal term that combines the senses of ‘summons’ and ‘hail’) him/her into a specific form of social ‘reality’ and social subjectivity”: Kavanagh 5.

In addition to reading each text for ideological contestation, I also attend to the ways in which the texts push back against the “emotional habitus” that makes war sensible for a particular social group at a particular moment in history. Deborah Gould defines the concept of an emotional habitus as the “socially constituted, prevailing ways of feeling and emoting, as well as the embodied, axiomatic understandings and norms about feelings and their expression.”³⁴ In Tim O’Brien’s classic Vietnam-era short story, “How to Tell a True War Story,” the reader is told that absent any attachment to nationalistic patriotism, *embarrassment* is strong enough to send soldiers to shoot strangers across the world: “Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment.”³⁵ Following Gould, embarrassment is an emotion that comes into being as belonging to O’Brien’s characters (the soldiers feel embarrassed *as* soldiers, *as* men, because they identify themselves as such) because their emotional habitus, formed by gendered modes of sociality that are referenced by the titular list of “things” the soldiers in the story carry throughout their tours, causes them to feel that embarrassment is the correct or natural way of feeling in their situation.

An emotional habitus makes sense of or gives form to the way one processes the world on an affective level (in this sense, emotional habitus might be considered the affective aspect of ideological formation, which allows one to make sense of the world and one’s “self” in it).³⁶ How might a text *move* its reader, emotionally and, perhaps, politically, affecting their orientation or

³⁴ Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) 10.

³⁵ Tim O’Brien, “The Things They Carried,” *The Things They Carried* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1990) 20.

³⁶ For Gould, affects result from one’s constant bodily encounters with the world; the body registers these affectations as intensities that can then be given socially legible form in a habitus as emotions. Gould further describes affects sensations, as situated in context, as social, and as having the potential to generate new political imaginaries: “Structures of feeling or affective states can shake one out of deeply grooved patterns of thinking and feeling and allow for new imaginings” (27).

position towards war? I am interested in the ways in which aesthetic objects help such affects come into being—come to be owned and understood by subjects as emotions or feelings—as socially legible by modelling emotional habituses, or ways of feeling that would make sense in a given situation. Social legibility is necessary for feelings to have the potential for political impact.³⁷ Such political impact can take the form of allegiance with, complacency toward, or resistance to the status quo. If, as I have been arguing, the status quo in the US since 1945 has been some form of a pro-war emotional habitus, I look to antiwar literature to see how this emotional habitus is contested and new ones are proposed.

Genre

The way the antiwar texts in this study contest existing ideological narratives and emotional habituses is through the formal structure of genre, an “aesthetic structure of affective expectation.”³⁸ Antiwar literature both relies upon and experiments with literary genre in order to do its affective and ideological work. Genre provides an account of the imbrication of art and feeling in the aesthetic encounter (by which I mean the point in time in which the subject encounters the art object; the time one spends engrossed in a novel or standing, struck, in front of a painting); as in Wilfred Owen’s preface to his collection of World War I trench poems: the

³⁷ Gould argues for the political relevance of affects and emotions because they “help to structure (but not determine) political possibilities and political actions in a given moment” (164). “Emotional habitus shape ways of feeling and emoting; they do not produce them in a mechanical, deterministic way” (36). Gould “counter[s] the idea that an analytical focus on affect and emotions necessarily leads to an individual-level explanation of social behavior” while acknowledging that “feelings alone do not determine a person’s political actions” (164).

³⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 4. I find Berlant’s theorization of genre compelling because she connects the function of genre as an aesthetic structure in cultural production, including literature, to a broader sense of genre as a way of understanding the affective expectations of various scenarios of everyday life. Her definition of genre continues: an “institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. It mediates what is singular, in the details, and general about the subject. It is a form of aesthetic expectation with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications: it locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediate” (4).

“poetry is in the pity.”³⁹ I explicate the formal practices with which my textual objects address their imagined audiences by probing places where the texts lean into their respective genre expectations and where they experiment with subverting or frustrating such expectations.

Genres provide an expectation or orientation towards a particular emotional experience; if you rent a horror film, you expect to be scared by the experience of watching it. But what would have frightened an audience in 1990 may well seem quaint to the average viewer in 2020.⁴⁰ All of the antiwar texts I analyze in this study work within recognizable genres to address their imagined audiences from an established, historically situated standpoint, and each also experiments with and modifies its genre. For example, Hersey’s *Hiroshima* relies on its status as a piece of serious journalism in the *New Yorker* magazine so that its readers *expect* to learn something about the world by reading it. At the same time, *Hiroshima* also makes use of novelesque literary techniques including descriptive writing and dramatic irony to go beyond the scope of the reading experience expected of a traditional piece of reportage, and it is in this aesthetic experimentation that I locate the ideological contestation and articulation of a new emotional habitus. I contend that antiwar literature always has to exceed or put pressure on established genre to do what it needs because the available established genres are more suited to the hegemonic pro-war position.

Chapter Summaries and Trajectory

Each of the four chapters is focused on example texts, aesthetic forms, and ways of addressing an audience that typify that historical moment. Close study of the ways in which this

³⁹ Wilfred Owen, *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921).

⁴⁰ Berlant understands genre “improvisation” as a means of recognizing the “emerging event” (6). She writes later in *Cruel Optimism* that “all genres are distinguished by the affective contract they promise: by claiming that certain affects embed the historical in persons and persons in the historical in ways that only the aesthetic situation could really capture, the cultural Marxist take on the historical novel foregrounds affect not as the sign of ahistoricism, but as the very material of historical embeddedness”: Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2011) 63.

affective solicitation has been attempted in a series of historical moments is important for thinking about what kinds of political art would resonate in our historical moment, in the current ideological environment, and in resistance to the hegemonic narrative(s) of the present moment. The chapters of this study cover a range of ideas about what an aesthetic practice should do. Though each of them engages with the concept of antiwar in some capacity, there is a wide span in the ways their critiques of US wars and militarism are *formed*.

If, as modernist literature scholar Sarah Cole argues, literary engagement with war violence as “enchanted” has characterized the violence as generative and the collective experience of war as the pinnacle of human love and bonding, how have writers sought to rearticulate war violence as irredeemably destructive and antiwar collectivity as necessary for living in the world?⁴¹ By identifying what war specifically means in each text and the formal solutions each attempts in order to contest their version of war, we gain an understanding of how antiwar urgency changes ways of writing political literature, and we learn ways of thinking about literature that wants to create some form of revolutionary desire (a change of thinking, feeling, and/or action) in different cultural and historical contexts.

The dissertation begins in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Chapter One argues that John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, as a work of antiwar literature, seeks to disrupt widespread US support for the nuclear bombings by suggesting that confronting the horror of the suffering in Hiroshima (which had been kept from the US public via unofficial censorship) is the right thing to do and that doing so will alleviate the guilt and anxiety Americans are feeling. *Hiroshima* displays an enduring belief in progress. I argue in part in this chapter that the report makes the most sense

⁴¹ Sarah Cole, “Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature,” *PMLA* 124.5 (Oct. 2009) 1632-1647. Cole argues that literary engagement with violent death takes one of two forms: enchanted (signifying *more*, as with Christ’s crucifixion) or disenchanting (the ultimate expression of emptiness, total degeneration and waste, as in Nazi death camps).

as a piece of writing when we examine it as seeking to produce sympathy for its Japanese subjects, the *hibakusha* or survivors of the atomic bombs, based on an assumption that this sympathy will be consequential. In my analysis of *Hiroshima*, I attend to the ways in which Hersey formally constructed his report to produce a particular presentation of reality that he wanted his readers to look at. I argue that Hersey's use of description, dramatic irony, and a narrative focus on six *hibakusha* attempts to get readers of the report to *feel* the horror of the days after the bombing so that they will come to recognize that their sense of the world must be adapted to include their implication in that horror.

In *Hiroshima*, the critique of the nation form happens by way of the rearticulation of key features of US anti-Japanese racism to solicit a compassionate reading of the *hibakusha*'s experience in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombing. As a *New Yorker* piece that was quickly turned into a Book-of-the-Month-Club pick, *Hiroshima* could count on its genre to create the expectation for such an emotionally open reading experience.⁴² In Hersey's report, war is the thing that makes cultured, good-hearted Americans who pay attention to the news (the kinds of people with subscriptions to the *New Yorker* or the Book-of-the-Month Club) believe that killing an unfathomable number of Japanese people is acceptable. Additionally, war causes one's government to lie or withhold information from its constituents, leading to an anxious, anticipatory sense of guilt, because what could be so unspeakably bad? In this context, *Hiroshima* acts as a work of antiwar literature by exposing the censored information, contesting the racist characterization of Japanese people as barbarous and unfeeling, and inviting readers to avow the

⁴² Janice A. Radway describes the Book-of-the-Month Club as having "fostered the definition of an imagined community of general readers" who were "understood to be captivated by books": Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 7.

responsibility of their government for the violence and suffering caused by the atomic bombs because such an avowal will make possible the recuperation of American exceptionalism.

The second chapter moves forward a quarter century to focus on the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a group of veterans-turned-antiwar while the war still raged. VVAW poetry and protest performances are the only works covered in the dissertation that were created during the war they were protesting. The urgency inherent in this temporality distinguishes these works from the other literary objects of this study. Unlike *Hiroshima*, which was published almost exactly one year after the atomic bombing it portrayed and criticized, VVAW performances and their publication of the poetry anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds* interspersed the broader antiwar movement against the American War in Vietnam (the war is conservatively dated 1964-73, and VVAW performances and poetry covered in chapter two spanned 1970-72). The aesthetic practices—poetry and performance—VVAW used to deliver their antiwar arguments were, I argue, tailored to an urgent, agitational mode of political action. VVAW wanted their aesthetic practices to play a part in ending the Vietnam War and believed that they would. This is different in kind to the antiwar impact I argue that *Hiroshima* is targeted toward, which is a retroactive ideological contestation—a change in people’s beliefs about the bombings after the fact—as well as the affective confusion I locate in Rob Halpern’s *Common Place* and the future-oriented revolutionary feeling that I chart being solicited by the speculative novels analyzed in Chapter Four.

VVAW agitated through performance protests and collective poetry projects at a historical moment of heightened belief in the political power of collective artist activism and social movements. While VVAW had become disenchanted with the passively pro-war US public, they still believed that by highlighting Americans’ complicity in a war made up of war crimes, they

could compel their countrymen to democratically end the Vietnam War. Frustrated with traditional electoral politics, VVAW went in search of a genre that would allow them to agitate against the war. Julia Bryan-Wilson's study of antiwar protests by artist collectives in the Vietnam-era, which argues that art audiences of this period were primed to find political *art* persuasive, provides solid reasoning for the VVAW turn to performance protests and poetry as potentially suitable genres for their antiwar argument.

VVAW aesthetic practice acts as antiwar literature by drawing on their audience's existing feeling that the Vietnam War was unnecessary and immoral. They dramatized themselves, Vietnam veterans, as "agent-victims" of the war (and here we see a self-reflexive interrogation of the ways racism and masculinity infuse US military training), urging their audience to see the war as a social problem for which they were culpable and therefore morally obligated—and politically empowered—to bring to an end. VVAW performance protests and poetry shared a desire to use "theatrical expression as a means of stirring up social complacency if not actually provoking social transformation" with Brechtian theatre as well as experimental theatre practices from the 1960s and '70s, including guerrilla theatre, developed and theorized by San Francisco Mime Troupe founder R.G. Davis to combat a pervasive state of alienation via aesthetic encounters.⁴³

The final pair of chapters are situated in the 21st century. By the time the US had engaged in the "war on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq and weathered several leaks of military scandals without much trouble, Rob Halpern's experimental poetry collection *Common Place* understands the world of which the US is the military and economic leader to be so far beyond saving, despite his romantic and reparative impulses, that the very categories of subjectivity that sustain this world need to be deranged in order to have a hope of grasping the extent of the problem. As a result,

⁴³ Claudio Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998) 130.

Common Place stages recurring sexual encounters between the poems' speaker and the corpse of a Yemeni man who died a detainee of the US military in Guantanamo Bay prison. Halpern's poems seek to revive the detainee through an obsessive focus on the autopsy report that was publicized as part of a Wikileaks data dump. *Common Place* is formally and theoretically ambitious; the work is interested in what poetry can do and what war does to art. To investigate these interests, Chapter Three analyzes the formal experimentation at work in the poetics of *Common Place*—specifically, the effects of formlessness, lyric apostrophe, and enjambment.

War as it is “metabolized” in Halpern's poems is what makes it impossible to intimately relate to and care about another person across the boundaries of life and death, race, and “enemy combatant” status. War also makes it impossible to be open about one's desires (in a historical moment of post-September 11, 2001, patriotic self-censorship). In this context, there is a powerful antiwar refusal (a disavowal of the hegemonic narrative's disavowal of the war violence and of nuance) in the ways in which Halpern's experimental poetry provokes aesthetic feelings of hesitancy, critical ambivalence, desire, and disgust. Because *Common Place* somewhat knowingly reproduces (rather than contests) certain elements of a “war on terror” ideology and structure of feeling, an antiwar reading of this text must do two things. First, it must identify the ways in which the collection works to contest and repair elements of the hegemonic pro-war structure of feeling, and second, it must reject aspects of the text that reproduce pro-war ideology or ways of feeling.

Finally, the dissertation closes with an analysis of two apocalyptic novels of the late 2010s, Omar El Akkad's *American War* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*.⁴⁴ Both novels forward the argument that this world is hopeless (and always had been, based on the origination of the US nation in settler colonialist genocide and enslavement) and the only thing to do is to imagine

⁴⁴ Omar El Akkad, *American War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit Books, 2015).

another world. In Chapter Four, we move from a national scale to the planetary, and war is refigured as no longer a particular historical international military conflict but as the daily experience of living under siege in the antiblack, homophobic environment of the US. In this context, antiwar desire is apocalyptic in nature—it seeks an end to the violent oppression of this world—and the novels that narrate this desire use it as a figure for revolution, prompting their readers to feel what it would be like to change the world at the most fundamental level.

The first two chapters of the dissertation, in terms of their understandings of the US and their orientation as objecting to US military action out of an attachment to American patriotism, bear some resemblance to the chorus of journalists and public figures whose immediate response to US state violence—for example, indefinite detention and separation of migrant children from their parents or adult guardians by ICE or a police killing—is “this is not who we are,” sometimes accompanied by and often implying that “we’re better than this.” For the texts analyzed in these chapters, a nationalist, American “we” is assumed, and being American means, or could mean, something *good*. They posit that government lies are offensive and state violence is an outrage that should be criticized. In the interest of a project to recuperate American exceptionalism, *Hiroshima* encourages readers to be suspicious (or to trust their existing suspicions) and critical of the anti-Japanese propaganda and censorship of details about the atomic bombings by the US government propaganda. The report does not directly ask its readers to take up nuclear disarmament campaigns, but it does challenge them to think of the Japanese as people—with families, feelings, and heroism—who have experienced horrific violence at the hands of the US. VVAW intensifies criticism of the US government and, crucially, turns this criticism onto themselves and their audience. The government and the media systems that reproduce the government narrative are no longer the sole/primary targets, as was the case with *Hiroshima*. VVAW poetry and performance

protests dramatically implicated US troops and civilians in a war of war crimes, charging them with the responsibility to act to end the war. Implied in this line of reasoning is the existence of a war that is *not* criminal, that would (in not violating the Geneva Conventions) be just and in keeping with US values. This, in turn, implies that the US is predicated on values that are inherently good and moral, something that some VVAW actors and actions begin to contest by connecting the current war with US settler colonialism and imperialism, but which is more forcefully rejected by the texts at the heart of the final two chapters.

By contrast, for the texts in the final two chapters, being American means being implicated in the foundational mass violence of settler colonialism (the colonial genocide of indigenous Americans being an apocalyptic founding of the US nation) and enslavement and their ongoing reproduction along with imperialism. In this view, the US state is not worth redeeming but instead should be abolished. The texts in these latter chapters act out different responses and orientations to the Adornian position that there is no way to live rightly in a wrong world.⁴⁵ Relatedly, the first two chapters believe their aesthetic practices can convince people to do or believe something regarding war. The final two chapters are disenchanted with his type of antiwar project and have other, more revolutionary, aesthetic and political goals. For Halpern, the goal is to denature categories of subjectivity (the categorical difference between “us” and “them,” for instance) in order to unravel the problem of American political violence and make relation (which, for the speaker of *Common Place* and the detainee, was ultimately doomed to fail) possible. The revolutionary goal for El Akkad and Jemisin is to imagine an end to a world that perpetuates war as white supremacist violence and the beginning of a world without war.

⁴⁵ “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen,” translated as “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”: Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. 119.

CHAPTER ONE: DESCRIBING NUCLEAR FALLOUT: JOHN HERSEY'S

HIROSHIMA AT THE DAWN OF THE ATOMIC AGE

At 8:15 on August 6, 1945, we could still work and sing and love. At 8:16, everything came to an end. Those of us who survived were transformed into men whose daily food is pain, whose constant company is fear. Tell everyone you know--simply to use his imagination.
Fumio Nakamura⁴⁶

Introduction

The *New Yorker* issue published on August 31, 1946 was unlike any other in the twenty-one-year history of the magazine in that it consisted entirely of John Hersey's report on the immediate aftermath of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan just over a year earlier. "Hiroshima" unfolded as a narrative, beginning moments before the bomb exploded and then proceeding to shift between the perspectives of six survivors as they navigated the decimated city in the hours and days that followed.⁴⁷ Making use of months' worth of personal interviews with survivors in Hiroshima, Hersey brought the heretofore censored story of the mortal, moral, and material consequences of the first-ever use of a nuclear weapon to the American public.

In this chapter, I am interested in evaluating *Hiroshima* as antiwar literature. By this, I mean to examine the ways in which the text served as an object of resistance to US militarism by evoking feelings of compassion for atomic bomb victims and of distrust in US military decisions. I argue that *Hiroshima* functions as antiwar literature in the sense that it is designed—at the level of form, tone, and content—to counter the pro-war propaganda that shaped the dominant political mood and dominant ideology of the US public at this historical moment. Put differently, *Hiroshima* acts in ideological contestation of the hegemonic state narrative regarding the atomic bombs,

⁴⁶ Quote appeared in the July-August 1971 issue of *The Catholic Worker*.

⁴⁷ John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *The New Yorker* (August 31, 1946). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>. Accessed 23 July 2019. Hereafter referred to as *Hiroshima* and cited parenthetically in the text using pagination from the subsequently published book version of the report: John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

where said bombs come to stand in for the military agenda at large. This contestation-as-counterpropaganda is what I am registering as the “anti” of antiwar here. This form of antiwar message is both packaged as and supplemented by its literary composition. Hersey’s report turns to literary devices, most markedly description, but also dramatic irony and character development akin to what literary scholar Caroline Levin has dubbed the “enormity effect” to affect its readers, with the end goal of re-articulating cultural conditions that had produced US acceptance of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

What are the aesthetic effects of description? I trace the ways in which the report combines these literary strategies to solicit a trio of feelings—anxiety, guilt, and compassion, the latter in the sense developed by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy as the “disturbance of violent relatedness” by way of feeling connected to others.⁴⁸ The report both operates on and advances the presumption that its (primarily American) readers are smart and sensitive enough that a simple description of the situation in Hiroshima with a focus on a sympathetic cast of characters will be powerful enough to change their thinking. I argue that the report seeks to disrupt support for the nuclear bombings by suggesting that confronting the horror of the suffering in Hiroshima is the right thing to do and that doing so will alleviate the guilt and anxiety Americans are feeling.

Hiroshima positions itself against pro-war propaganda, both challenging and unravelling the major talking points necessary for maintaining public support for the war effort while, importantly, maintaining itself as a narrative report rather than a didactic text. In an example of such oblique contestation, of the initial US effort to calculate the bombs’ casualties, the report states, “No one in the city government pretended that these figures were accurate—though the

⁴⁸ Nancy defines compassion “not as a pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Com-compassion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness”: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) xiii.

Americans accepted them as official” (81). I take pro-war propaganda such as these “official” US casualty statistics to be a part of the broader work of state ideology formation. I discuss the role of propaganda in and relation to ideology formation in more detail in the following section of this chapter, but for now I will only add that the relationship between pro-war persuasion and nationalist ideology formation is a circular one, for the nation-state uniquely and additionally relies on its military apparatus and a threshold of control of the media—classification and censorship of information being the most obvious methods by which the state directs media coverage—to maintain power via the threat of physical force.⁴⁹

When we turn our attention to the affective capacity of *Hiroshima* as a uniquely literary text, our concern is with the ways in which the form of the text shapes the reading experience and what response(s) that experience is designed to solicit. Who is its audience, in what institutional context are they reading it, and how does the text address them, meeting them halfway in order to move them somewhere else? In order to ascertain the antiwar function of *Hiroshima*, in other words, we must first determine the textual function of *Hiroshima*, which will be accomplished through close readings of the report. For example, through dramatic irony, *Hiroshima* establishes a widespread feeling of paranoia amongst the people of Hiroshima, the cause of which is US military tactics. This has the antiwar effect of tapping into the paranoid anxiety of its American readers, caused by systematic censorship of information related to the atomic bombings. The report seizes upon this paranoid anxiety to contest dominant strains of pro-war ideology; in fact, the report suggests to its readers: your paranoia is well-founded (just as the Japanese had good reason to fear attack, so are Hersey’s readers correct about something awful being hidden from them), the

⁴⁹ As historian Christopher R. Hill writes, the “state is seen as deriving its power not only from a monopoly of violence, as Max Weber put it, but also from a monopoly of information that was often about violence”: *Peace and Power in Cold War Britain: Media, Movements, Democracy c.1945-1968* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) 5.

Japanese have recognizable and sympathetic responses that you already share, or/and your fear of nuclear annihilation *is* warranted. Furthermore, the report suggests that its US readers are complicit in the production of this nuclear threat, which is all the more apparent now that they have a fuller understanding of the deployment of atomic bombs by the US.

Establishing cultural context also clarifies places where the text can be seen to be pushing for a potential *restructuring* of the emotional habitus—what it is possible to feel in a given historical moment. I will argue that *Hiroshima* works to create openings for such change by describing the impact of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima on an individual, embodied human level and on a grand scale, as if from a scientific perspective beyond the limitations of human subjectivity. I see *Hiroshima* working to bring these distinct scales together via formal strategies including Levine’s “enormity effect,” which combines the tradition of the aesthetic sublime and the formal use of character types in the realist novel in order to “imagin[e] a vast scale without actually representing the many” with the effect of “activat[ing] an ethical crisis through its glimpse of the vast extent of ordinary pain.”⁵⁰ In doing so, *Hiroshima* serves as a challenge both to dominant feelings of acceptance of the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to the feelings, which made such acceptance palatable, of distrust and difference toward the Japanese population. Such anti-Japanese sentiment was fostered by state propaganda that established the Japanese as possessing a “racial” character such that they were incapable of entering into recognizable forms of human community.

Previous literary analyses of *Hiroshima* have focused on the groundbreaking nature of Hersey’s decision to situate his report from the perspective of a selection of individual Japanese victims of the atomic bomb. While I take up this rhetorical technique as contributing to the

⁵⁰ Caroline Levine, “The Enormity Effect: Realist Fiction, Literary Studies, and the Refusal to Count,” *Genre* 50.1 (April 2017) 62, 65.

affective experience of reading the report, I primarily attend to the aesthetic and political effects of the use of description in the text, which is less examined in critical readings of the report. Perhaps taken for granted as a factor of Hersey's blend of journalism and narrative, description is a crucial vehicle of the ideological contestation I locate in *Hiroshima*. As literary scholar Dora Zhang notes in her study of modernist descriptive writing, description shapes perception yet gains its ideological power by insisting on its objectivity (that is, the fact that it merely represents what exists in a matter-of-fact, unbiased manner).⁵¹ In *Hiroshima*, Hersey combines two primary writing styles—journalistic reportage & literary description—to compose an antiwar argument that will appeal to readers who have been taught to be receptive to this sort of ideological power. The *New Yorker*, with its established reputation for publishing both journalism and literary pieces of high standard, already has the ideal audience for a text like *Hiroshima*, and the subsequent reprintings in local newspapers, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and public radio readings provided audiences similarly primed to be receptive to the descriptive storytelling in the report.

On the one hand, Hersey's text performed an antiwar function by acting in direct opposition to the US government policy of censorship in order to expose to its citizens (and the broader global public) the breathtakingly destructive impact of the atomic bomb on citizens of Hiroshima. On the other, as a work of journalism that employed distinctly literary techniques for aesthetic effect, *Hiroshima* complemented its informational, anti-war censorship function by concurrently offering an antiwar aesthetic experience designed to dismantle key elements of US pro-war propaganda. If we think of the purpose of art being, in the oft-quoted words of literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky,

⁵¹ Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020) 2. Literary scholar Phyllis Frus claims that the “underlying reason why critics call the documentary style of *Hiroshima* ‘fictional’...[is] not that the techniques have been borrowed from fiction but that the effect they achieve has been declared normative in modern literature or art”: Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (Cambridge, England & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 169.

“in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony” with the goal of “creat[ing] the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things,” then we can understand *Hiroshima* functioning as a work of literature to bring Hersey’s audience not only the facts of the effects of the atomic bomb but also a fully felt sensation.⁵²

I understand *Hiroshima* to be functioning as literary propaganda rather than agitational antiwar literature—that is, with the purpose or intended result of leading to a change in thought or belief, on the level of ideology, rather than as an explicit call to some form of political action. Existing scholarship on Hersey’s report is ambivalent regarding its political impact: while *Hiroshima* has been called the “most famous magazine article ever published,” there is not a direct line between its reception and collective action in protest of the US use of nuclear weapons.⁵³ What I aim to bring out in what follows are the ways in which *Hiroshima* invites its readers to resist the pro-war hegemonic narrative of its present moment by imagining what it was like to be at the scene of the blast. In doing so, *Hiroshima* articulates a structure for feeling, as the report intimates good American citizens should, against the atomic bombs.

Anti-Japanese War Propaganda and Atomic Censorship

The US state managed a massive war propaganda campaign regarding the war in the Pacific, using the emergency powers of the War Department to shape the information that reached the public through the press. Insofar as I argue that *Hiroshima* served as informative role for its

⁵² Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” from *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. & trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). In the words of literary scholar David Wyatt, Hersey “must fall back on fictional devices...if he is to find any way to move his reader”: *Secret Histories: Reading Twentieth Century American Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) 159.

⁵³ Quote from John Hersey’s obituary in the *New Yorker*, quoted in Mary F. Corey, *World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 36.

Political protests of the US’s burgeoning nuclear weapons program did occur in and following Hersey’s present moment. For sociological analysis of two instantiations of antiwar activism of this sort, see “Nuclear weapons: internationalism, direct action, and women alone” and “Anti-Bomb and anti-Treaty: the emergence of a peace movement” in Cynthia Cockburn’s *Antimilitarism* (New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

US readers, an account of the official and unofficial censorship policies at play in this period makes clear the degree to which the contents of *Hiroshima* radically rejected them and, in doing so, critiqued the hegemonic US narrative (in support) of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For this reason, this section of the chapter first defines my use of the term “propaganda” and its relation to the management by the state of ideological and affective responses to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and then compiles a historical account of the anti-Japanese/pro-war propaganda that was a primary target for rearticulation in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.

Propaganda refers to the cultural production that is created and disseminated with the intention of instilling a given political position in its audience. It is meant to spread a belief or set of beliefs among a target population. Etymologically related to the verb “propagate,” through which it bears connotations to breeding practices, one might think of a military plane dropping propaganda leaflets over enemy civilian centers as an attempt to *seed* a position or attitude in the targeted area. During the war years and the year between the surrender of Japan and the publication of *Hiroshima*, US war propaganda ultimately functioned by way of a double dehumanization of the Japanese enemy through incitement of both outright anti-Japanese racist sentiment and an active avoidance of considerations of a human cost to destructive effects of the war (including the atomic bombings, conventional bombing raids, and the institution of internment camps in the US for Japanese Americans).

In order to maintain state power, US government leadership (through a combination of direct communications with the public and its influence on the press and various cultural institutions) educates its own citizens in what to think *and* how to feel. For this reason, I maintain that both an array of ideological formations *and* a structure (or structures) of feeling are necessary to the preservation of the hegemonic perspective. Importantly, here I diverge from theories of

ideology by cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Fredric Jameson that exclude consideration of affect and feeling and instead follow cultural studies scholar Ben Highmore, who takes up Marxist theorist Raymond Williams's concept of structures of feeling in order to consider "moods and feelings as social and historical qualities" that are "embedded in cultural forms."⁵⁴ For Hall, the purpose of ideological narrative is to produce a historically specific connection between those in power and the ideas they seek to make standard.⁵⁵ There is struggle involved because the coalition of power-holders, their ideas, and the connection between the two are never wholly settled—there is always room for contestation regarding how a society does or should operate and for the breaking and forming of ideological connections, which Hall terms, following Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, rearticulation.⁵⁶ By thinking with Highmore about the role of cultural forms in managing (always social) feeling, I am able to consider ideological contestation and feeling in relation one another as parts of a Gramscian formation, a cluster of formed, shared feelings about the war, the Japanese, the American nation, and (less explicitly but inseparable from the previous two items) whiteness. Approaching *Hiroshima* from this relational perspective allows me to analyze how the text, as counterpropaganda, addresses the situation of its readers by first reflecting and then attempting to disrupt a pervasive mood and set of assumptions that the text imagines its readers are experiencing. The mood that *Hiroshima* addresses textually is one of guilt

⁵⁴ Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Meditation and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 1-2. Highmore goes on to claim that a "moment's *this-ness* (its presence, for want of a better word, or its deictic character, to use more technical vocabulary) is to be found at the level of mood and feeling" and the "shape and texture of social experience is often best grasped as a pattern of feeling and mood" (3). On Williams's structures of feeling, Highmore writes: "'Structures of feeling' is a phrase that points at one and the same time to an overarching orchestration of energies, attitudes and emotions, and to the fact that 'we' may experience this orchestration differently depending on our background and current situation" (25).

⁵⁵ In the words of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, the "effective coupling of dominant ideas to the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological struggle is *intended to secure*." Morley and Chen 44.

⁵⁶ Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, whose own writing about ideology is extensive, glosses Hall's concept of rearticulation as a "discursive struggle" in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London and New York: Verso, 2016) 6.

and anxiety, which we can see the form of the report identifying as stemming from the general public's awareness that information about the atomic bombs' effects in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was being concealed from them.

For Levine, drawing on philosophers Jacques Rancière and Roberto Mangabeira Unger, works of literature have the ability to impact politics as elements of a social order that is an arrangement of interacting hierarchies rather than a single coherent system with a common root cause. Levine insists that social change requires rearrangement, as opposed to the illusion exposure she associates with “traditional ideology critique.”⁵⁷ I see helpful similarities between Levine's position and Hall's conception of articulation as both an epistemology and a political strategy.⁵⁸ While I follow Hall's thinking more closely, I think it worth holding on to Levine's specific concern with the political potential of literature as well as her distinction between exposure and rearrangement to ask in this chapter: How is *Hiroshima* attempting to rearrange elements it identifies in the dominant order (for example, anti-Japanese racism; xenophobic paranoia; understandings of the atomic bomb as necessary, inevitable, or even merciful)⁵⁹ and not just expose these lines of argument as constructed? To answer this question, we must first determine what the specific types of propaganda pushed by the US government were meant to produce: what feelings, behaviors, beliefs surrounding the use of nuclear weapons and the war itself?

⁵⁷ Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015) 17-18.

⁵⁸ Communications and cultural studies scholar Jennifer Daryl Slack describes articulation as, among other things, a “way of thinking the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be unities” that “provides a mechanism for shaping intervention within a particular social formation, conjuncture or context.” Her essay, “The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies,” explicates the manifold functions of articulation and the term's critical development (Morley and Chen, 112).

⁵⁹ Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton and political scientist Richard A. Falk characterize the thought process in the US with regard to the role of nuclear weapons leading up to the Cold War as “American willingness to embrace a policy of genocide and ecocide...[as] defensive necessity,” where the “ideological preparation for nuclear war centers on nurturing a hatred for ‘the enemy’”: *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982) 212, 213.

The historical context in which *Hiroshima* was published and first widely read is too complex to be easily summarized; nevertheless, it is crucial to account for the dominant narrative within which the report was read because the report functioned very directly as *counterpropaganda* and so must be analyzed in relation to the pro-war propaganda it sought to contradict.⁶⁰ War and antiwar activity must similarly be understood as engaged in a dialectical relationship, wherein just as antiwar movements work to dismantle specific aspects of war (the draft, for one example that has been particularly targeted by antiwar activists), pro-war propaganda aims to neutralize or reverse already-existing antiwar sentiment. Both meanings of dominant—having power over and predominating compared with other options—are at play in my use of the term “dominant narrative” to mean a framing of the present moment that originates from a source of power and contains both information and instructions for how to feel about that information. So, what we are after here is what Americans were told by the Truman administration and how they were primed to feel about the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the war years and the year between the end of the war and the “Hiroshima” issue of the *New Yorker*.⁶¹ In the later section on Hersey’s use of description as a literary technique in *Hiroshima*, I will discuss the antiwar work of literary defamiliarization, but here it is also important to note the role *Hiroshima* plays in contesting the ideological formation of the US state that normalizes war, presenting it as an acceptable event. As a work of counterpropaganda, *Hiroshima* takes aim at key strains of pro-war

⁶⁰ The methodological decision to consider the text within its historical context implicitly challenges readings of *Hiroshima* as “dehistoricized” and therefore compartmentalizable by readers due to its beginning on August 6, 1945 with the moment of the atomic bomb flash. Literary scholar Margot Norris takes this view of Hersey’s report in *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) 175.

⁶¹ Per political theorist Ernest Laclau in the first attempted theory of articulation in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), a “class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized” (quoted in Morley and Chen, 119).

propaganda, and primary among these is the promotion of anti-Japanese racism, which was weaponized in support of the war on the Pacific front.

The article “A Fine Moral Point” by Daniel Lang, published in the *New Yorker* two months before Hersey’s *Hiroshima* as part of their “Reporter at Large” series, contains several examples of US war propaganda as well as a nascent version of some of the rhetorical techniques Hersey will make much stronger use of in his later report. Lang reports on his experience tagging along with a group of US military personnel and atomic scientists on a research visit to Hiroshima. Lang details the ways in which the group felt pressured to provide a coherent story that complemented US interests in light of Japanese narratives that were leading the global community to “question the humaneness of American methods of warfare.”⁶² The main interlocuter in the article is nuclear physicist Philip Morrison, who, although he had written six months prior in the *New Republic* of the devastating effects of the atomic bomb as impacting the global population on an existential level,⁶³ spoke of the atomic bomb as “perhaps...a labor-saving device” that had hastened Japanese surrender (avoiding any mention of the role of the bomb in producing Japanese casualties), repeated the characterization of Hiroshima as a military target, and downplayed and displaced the severity of radiation sickness by contradicting Japanese medical doctors’ accounts. Lang’s article launders these strains of official US discourse, but it also details for the US public which facts Morrison’s group ended up concealing from their governmental report and the stark yet fleeting impact that witnessing the scale of destruction in Hiroshima had on them.

⁶² Lang 63

⁶³ “Man will not live the same again for this advance...*It goes without saying that, like most of the scientists of the project, I am completely convinced that another war cannot be allowed...We have a chance to build a working peace on the novelty and terror of the atomic bomb*”: Philip Morrison, “Beyond Imagination,” *The New Republic* 114. 6 (11 Feb. 1946): 177-180, 180, original emphasis.

Anti-Japanese War Propaganda

As Lang's article shows, the US government promoted the anti-Japanese sentiments that shaped public opinion towards a view that the war, and the use of the atomic bombs therein, were acceptable. With regard to initial public opinion following the August 6 and 9, 1945, bombings, historian Michael Kort writes that "most Americans strongly supported President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic weapons against Japan."⁶⁴ Historian of science Spencer R. Weart notes in his account of nuclear fear that "in mid-1945 most people had expected many more bloody months of battle, and now two bombs seemed to have magically brought surrender and peace."⁶⁵ For the most part, the first historical accounts by academics largely followed suit: The "historiography of the bombing of Hiroshima originally was dominated by commentators who argued that the use of the bomb was militarily and morally justified."⁶⁶ As historian Sven Lindqvist notes in his *History of Bombing*, Truman shaped this view of the atomic bombings as successful and merciful in his initial radio broadcast announcing the strike on Hiroshima:

A military base had been selected for the attack, he [Truman] said, 'because we wished in the first attack to avoid, as much as possible, the killing of civilians.' But if 'the Japs,' as he called them, did not surrender, this consideration would soon have to be set aside, and 'unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives would be lost.'

This left the impression that thousands of civilian lives had not been lost in Hiroshima. As Truman well knew, that was a lie.⁶⁷

Former Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, added to the official government narrative of the atomic bombs as lifesaving in an article arguing that the purpose of the atomic bombs was "not to kill but

⁶⁴ Michael Kort, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 5. Norris puts US approval of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at 70-80% (181).

⁶⁵ Spencer R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 56-57.

⁶⁶ Kort 8. Lifton and Falk define modern militarism as a "comprehensive reliance on instruments of violence in the pursuit of national security" (237). While I would add that the veracity of a national security threat need only be alleged and not proven, this definition spells out the assumed connection between violence and morality that underlies the orthodox position on US nuclear weapons use described by Kort and Weart.

⁶⁷ Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg (New York: The New Press, 2000) 112. Wyatt argues that the active construction in Hersey's report is a critique of the passive construction of government statements such as Truman's: "Hersey configures his story as one about silence and speaking out" (160-61).

to save lives—the lives of 1-1.5 million Americans that it would have cost to invade Japan.”⁶⁸ Though this figure was completely fabricated, it was repeated until it was considered gospel. Therefore, the accurate, up-to-date casualty statistics in *Hiroshima* functioned as counter-propaganda.

A major consequence of the narrative of nuclear weapons as moral and lifesaving is that “when U.S. authorities insist that countless Japanese as well as American lives were saved by the action, they pressure *hibakusha*, the Japanese term for atomic bomb victims, to recode their sufferings as a necessary sacrifice for whose opportunity they should be grateful.”⁶⁹ As will be explored in detail below, Hersey’s literary treatment of *hibakusha* as the fully-developed characters of his report whose lives would have been recognizable and sympathetic to a contemporary American readership could be viewed as pushing back against this aspect of the official narrative justifying the bombing.⁷⁰ The cohesion of the narrative of the bombing put forth by the state (as communicated by Truman via radio broadcast, which is quoted in *Hiroshima*), the academic community largely responsible for producing the historical record of the events, and the general public produced a dominant narrative that was pro-war in its depiction of the use of atomic weapons by the US military on an enemy nation as purposeful, successful, and moral.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Quoted in Lindqvist 118.

⁶⁹ Norris 178.

⁷⁰ “If you read between the lines of the book, Hersey’s subjective choices of who to include, and how to unfurl carefully culled details through his subjects’ eyes, did not just give the book its emotional power. Taken together, these choices laid out a clear point of view against the atomic bomb”: Erika Hayasaki, “Daughters of the Bomb: A Story of Hiroshima, Racism, and Human Rights,” *Narratively* (5 Aug. 2020). <https://narratively.com/daughters-of-the-bomb-a-story-of-hiroshima-racism-and-human-rights/>.

⁷¹ Kort points to Norman Cousins and Thomas K. Finletter’s *Saturday Review of Literature* essay, published just before *Hiroshima* on June 15, 1946 as the first textual example of what came to be known as “revisionism,” the term for “historical writing critical of the American decision to use atomic weapons against Japan.” Cousins and Finletter framed the US use of atomic bombs on Japan as a means to “limit Soviet influence in East Asia” rather than their stated purpose of ending the war (Kort 9). A condensed version of the original *Saturday Review of Literature* piece was reprinted as Cousins, Norman and Thomas K. Finletter. “A Beginning for Sanity: A Review of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2, no. 1-2 (1946): 11-14.

In order to successfully persuade Americans of the mainstream narrative of the US use of atomic weapons on the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as necessary and moral, a complementary narrative of Japanese people as radically Other was simultaneously disseminated.⁷² The destructive capacity of the atomic bombs was made more palatable by a belief that the bombs' victims were incapable of benefitting from a military strategy based in reason or empathy. Accounts of the suicidality of the Japanese "never surrender" policy were given both via statistics and descriptive narratives.⁷³ For example, a March 14, 1944 *New York Times* article began: "Five hundred Japanese hurled themselves into certain death upon the barriers in one sector before the American beachhead on Bougainville Island in the Solomons Saturday" in "repeated suicidal attacks" wherein the "Japanese knew no hope and had but one purpose—to kill as many Americans as possible before they died."⁷⁴ Crucial to shaping US public opinion regarding the Japanese was the decision by the US Marines to release photographs of the aftermath of the battle of Tarawa, in which the Japanese suffered a 99.7 percent death rate rather than be taken prisoner, to the American press, "causing a wave of shock, revulsion, and fear across the country."⁷⁵ This media strategy starkly contrasted the censorship of images and details of the carnage caused by the atomic bombs, discussed at length in the following section.

⁷² Historian John W. Dower explicates a longer historical context of American anti-Japanese sentiment in *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (London: Pantheon, 1986) 38-39. Dower traces anti-Japanese racism to a history of anti-Orientalism, from which 1930s popular writers including Pearl S. Buck increased popular sympathy for Chinese at the expense of the Japanese, whose bombing of Chinese cities and civilians were labelled "barbarous."

⁷³ See Kort 37-38.

⁷⁴ The article seems to boast of the violence US troops used against their suicidal attackers, reporting that "Americans used rifles, machine guns, booby traps, land mines, flame-throwers, hand grenades and bazookas to halt" the Japanese. "Japanese in Suicide Attacks." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 14, 1944. <https://proxy.lib.wayne.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/107019817?accountid=14925>. Accessed 22 Sept 2019.

⁷⁵ Kort 37. Furthermore, Dower notes that the US government's strategically delayed release, over six months after the fact in January 1944, of news of the Bataan Death March of April 1942 furthered characterized the Japanese as militarily barbarous and unredeemable (*War Without Mercy* 52).

Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, who led Marine forces in the Battle of Guadalcanal, summed up the Japanese troops' philosophy as totally alien from a US perspective: "I have never heard or read of this kind of fighting. These people refuse to surrender."⁷⁶ The Battle of Guadalcanal, fought over six months in 1942-43, proved extremely important to the US both in terms of military strategy and public opinion of the war with Japan. News of the high death rate in the battle and its protracted length ultimately led to a belief in the necessity of the extermination of the Japanese nation, the logic being that if the Japanese insisted on fighting to the last man, defeating them would mean killing them all.⁷⁷ There is therefore a direct line from public acceptance of the racist narrative of the Japanese as barbaric and suicidal to the acceptance of atomic bombing of Japanese cities.⁷⁸

The dominant narrative of Japanese military strategy influenced US public feeling about the destructiveness of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki so successfully that a sense of moral justification held even after Hersey's report provided accurate casualty estimates, correcting governmental reports that had lowballed the numbers of dead and wounded.⁷⁹ While Shinto was closely aligned with the Japanese state in the early 20th century and the practice is, per Lindqvist, "nationalism elevated to a religion" and entailed for some (but, importantly, not all) adherents a belief in *yasu-kuni*, wherein "wars of aggression are believed to have brought peace to

⁷⁶ Kort 35.

⁷⁷ Dower, *War Without Mercy* 52.

⁷⁸ Anti-nuclear arms work must necessarily be anti-racist, as the connection between normalized white supremacy and nuclear proliferation remains: "Today, the nuclear weapons system is still sanctioned by structures of white supremacy and power, under claims of safety and self-defense. It continues to protect those in power, while nuclear testing harms people of color around the world, contaminating food and water resources and exposing residents to radiation": Hayasaki.

⁷⁹ Dower, *War Without Mercy* 52. In his history of the *New Yorker*, Journalism scholar Ben Yagoda echoes this point: "Hersey had for the first time established the number of casualties—100,000 dead and 100,000 wounded in a city of 245,000": *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York: Scribner, 2000) 192. Per media historian Jeffrey A. Smith, Hersey's essay served to counter assertions like the one Secretary of War Henry Stimson made in a *Harper's* article that 1,000,000 American casualties had been prevented by atomic bombs. However, Smith concludes that Hersey's success as a corrective source was "confined mainly to elite audiences": *War and Press Freedom: The Problem of Prerogative Power* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 167.

the land” (174), such cultural considerations were *not* at the root of racist US media and government portrayals of Japanese people. The absence of Shinto and the overrepresentation of Christianity in two of the six major characters of Hersey’s *Hiroshima* are, however, evidence of an attempt by the report to produce distance between the reality of the lives of the *hibakusha* and the negative characterizations of Japanese people in US pro-war propaganda.⁸⁰

When Hersey’s essay was published, just over a year after Japan surrendered to the United States to end World War II, the Department of Justice was still operating internment camps that imprisoned people of Japanese ancestry (of various citizenships). While the majority of those imprisoned in these camps and the better-known War Relocation Authority concentration camps were released in the final years of World War II, Asian American studies scholar and former internee Tetsuden Kashima notes that the last internment camp did not close until 1948.⁸¹ While the fact that these camps were allowed to continue to operate in the US says something about the success of the dominant narrative disavowing empathy or solidarity with people of Japanese ancestry, also at play was a communications strategy of censorship and disinformation. Reports, photographs, and film from the camps as well as internally-produced camp newspapers were kept from the public, and the camps were described as necessary for maintaining national security and, in any case, comfortable and even luxurious.⁸²

⁸⁰ Literary scholar Jocelyn Dupont argues that “Hersey consciously selected these survivors so that the Japanese voices found in the book would differ from the dominant stereotypes of the time. As Patrick Sharp notes, “Hersey decided to focus his narrative on six survivors who would appeal to the pathos of the American audience, and who implicitly undermined the representation of the Japanese as a fanatical, militaristic Shinto horde”: “The Violence of Hiroshima: Hersey, *Bataille* and *Caruth*,” *Sillages critiques* 22 (2017) 445. <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/4906>. Accessed 7 October 2019.

⁸¹ The last facility closed by INS (the Justice Department’s Immigration and Naturalization Service) was the Crystal City Family Internment Camp in Crystal City, Texas. It closed on February 27, 1948: Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment Without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) 121.

⁸² Smith 21. Journalist Harvey Solomon’s account of the legitimately luxurious accommodations for Japanese, German, and Italian diplomats detained by the US in the first half of the war (Allied and Axis diplomatic exchanges took place in 1942) describes the racialized resentments enflamed by the diplomats’ access to coffee and other rationed goods in their hotel confinement. “Seeing their enemy treated so well left typical Americans resentful,

At the same time that control of information about internment camps encouraged the public not to think too much about them, the US government also worked to separate the public from their fellow civilians psychologically while they carried out the physical separations.⁸³ They did so by referring to internees in government documents as “Alien Enemies,” deliberately obfuscating the fact that some were native-born US citizens (of Japanese, German, or Italian ancestry).⁸⁴ The rhetorical choice of “Alien Enemies” as the official descriptor of certain US residents served to both differentiate Japanese people (primarily, along with other internees) from the larger American public and to dehumanize them in order to imprison them outside of the process generally expected in the US justice system: “Officially, these internment cases were given individual legal review, but in practice the majority of Issei [first-generation Japanese immigrants] were imprisoned without evidence that they posed any threat to national security.”⁸⁵ Even the appeal to legislative authority performed by the DOJ and WRA, the results of which would later be officially apologized for by the US government, is evidence of the US government putting forth a racist

particularly in the case of Japanese detainees”: Rachel Pistol, “*Such Splendid Prisons: Diplomatic Detainment in America during World War II*,” *Michigan War Studies Review* (25 Sept. 2020). <http://www.miwsr.com/2020-086.aspx>. See Harvey Solomon, *Such Splendid Prisons: Diplomatic Detainment in America during World War II* (Lincoln, NB: Potomac Books, 2020).

⁸³ Per Dower, even if the US military/government leadership’s description and treatment of people of Japanese ancestry was a failure to empathize with populations designated as enemy and not a proactive racist and authoritarian military strategy, such failure to empathize was repeated in the latter half of the 20th century in Vietnam (Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara admitted this mistake in a filmed 2003 interview) and Iraq and Afghanistan: Dower, *The Violent American Century* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017) 87.

⁸⁴ A recent historical write-up of the Crystal City camp by the government-run Texas Historical Commission notes that the internees’ provisions were “often better than the housing and living conditions of the rationing public in Zavala County, Texas,” but also notes that there were armed guards and a 10-foot barbed-wire fence enclosing the camp. This description of provisions seems intended to minimize the wrongfulness of the imprisonment by way of a disingenuous comparison, and the write-up overall attempts to justify the imprisonment of “prisoners of war” who were “potentially dangerous”: “Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp.” *Texas Historical Commission*. <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/military-history/texas-world-war-ii/world-war-ii-japanese-american-2#sthash.rsZDHEAe.dpuf>. (20 December 2018). Accessed 11 June 2019.

⁸⁵ “Incarceration, Japanese American.” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity, Jr., 2nd ed., vol. 3, Macmillan Reference USA, 2008, p599-601. Gale Virtual Reference Library, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3045301098/GVRL?u=lom_waynesu&sid=GVRL&xid=a9ab4e13. Accessed 11 June 2019. The President and Congress “authorized the removal and incarceration of over 110,000 people based solely on race without charges, hearings, or evidence of wrongdoing. More than two-thirds of those incarcerated were U.S. citizens—over half were children” (“Internment, Japanese American”).

narrative equating Japanese heritage with otherness, suspicion, and criminality. All of this is significant context for the reception of *Hiroshima*, a report entirely and sympathetically concerned with both the extent of the destruction caused by the US military with the first atomic bomb and the corresponding experiences of its Japanese victims.

As important as what the US public was told to believe about the Japanese as a homogenous population is what was purposefully left out of the dominant narrative, which brings us to the function of *Hiroshima* as an exposé of the toll of the atomic bomb and, as such, an antiwar action against US military censorship. After the surrender of Japan, a combination of practices, including selectively releasing information, promoting disinformation, and totally censoring certain information continued to produce the dominant US narrative about the role of nuclear weapons in the end of the war. Journalism historian Kathy Roberts Forde summarized the dominant narrative about atomic power in the US in the time period between the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the publication of Hersey's report as "shaped by official government sources that misleadingly portrayed Hiroshima and Nagasaki as military targets and withheld information about radiation sickness and other disturbing consequences of the bombings."⁸⁶ That Hiroshima was consistently described as a military target in fact evinces awareness on the part of US government and military leadership that the use of the atomic bomb on the city would be seen as wrong or at least inconsistent with a narrative of American exceptionalism, of the US as that "most peace-loving of nations."⁸⁷ *Hiroshima* describes Hiroshima as a civilian population center, correcting and pointing out the falsehood of the US government narrative, by making only brief mention of Japanese soldiers affected by the bomb and spending most of the text focused on civilian casualties.

⁸⁶ Kathy Roberts Forde, "Profit and Public Interest: A Publication History of John Hersey's 'Hiroshima,'" *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (Autumn 2011): 565.

⁸⁷ Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Ward Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of U.S. Imperial Arrogance and Criminality* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003) 39.

Pro-war Censorship

Although the U.S. Office of Censorship, as an emergency wartime agency, ceased operations in November 1945, critical media coverage continued to be a rarity as “both Truman and the War Department discouraged public discussion of the bomb beyond what was contained in official releases, with Truman privately asking editors and broadcasters to self-censor.”⁸⁸ The same day that the Office of Censorship shuttered, the War Department released the following statement instituting a de facto censorship policy: “It is the duty of every citizen, in the interest of national safety, to keep all discussion of this subject [the atomic bomb] within the limits of information disclosed in official releases.”⁸⁹ Prominent newspaper columnist Stewart Alsop characterized the general attitude of the US public toward atomic energy at the time as a “sort of Victorian reaction to the whole subject,” buttoned-up and taboo, better not to be spoken about.⁹⁰

Internalized self-censorship combined with other strands of the hegemonic US state narrative, such as anti-Japanese racist sentiment, as we have seen, which was joined by intensifying anti-Soviet propaganda, to manage public feelings about war, nuclear weapons, and the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following the publication of *Hiroshima*, polls and surveys of *New Yorker* readers showed that a significant minority wished the US military had had time to drop *more* bombs before Japan surrendered or came away from their reading of *Hiroshima* hoping the

⁸⁸ Forde 566. Smith provides an example of an exceptional instance during the war where journalism critical of US military decisions had a measurable impact. Reporting on the firebombing of Dresden describing the attacks as “terror tactics” led to an American policy statement restricting air raids to military targets and limiting attacks in populated areas (166). Yet one has to wonder if the change was merely a matter of semantics and not of material or moral improvement, given that later that year Hiroshima was simply labelled a military target in order to provide a rationale for dropping the atomic bomb there.

⁸⁹ Smith 167.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Weart 68. Highmore notes a British legal prohibition of the “circulat[ion of] reports or statements ‘likely to cause alarm or despondency’” (71, quoting from Sinfield, Alan “Culture, Consensus and Difference: Angus Wilson to Alan Hollinghurst,” in Alan Sinfield and Alistair Davies, eds., *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945–1999* [London: Routledge, 2000] 83–102).

US would nuke the Soviet Union.⁹¹ The dominant narrative formed by the government with the cooperation of the media and internalized by the US public was a societal view of atomic energy as inappropriate for public discussion, let alone criticism.

Antiwar Counterpropaganda: Information as Ideological Contestation

Having established an account of the propaganda environment in which *Hiroshima* was written and published and within which it addresses its readers, this section develops my argument for how Hersey's report functioned as counter-propaganda that targeted both a specific, systemic lack of public information and a dominant structure of feeling. In general, editorial leadership at the *New Yorker* saw Hersey's essay as a corrective to complacent acceptance of the US use of nuclear weapons—that is, as a challenge to the dominant narrative at the “dawn of the atomic age.”⁹² Editor-in-chief Harold Ross wrote to E.B. White that the idea to print “Hiroshima” as a standalone issue was “to wake people up,” which Editor-of-fact William Shawn believed was the duty of their magazine.⁹³ Corey also points out a concern shared among the *New Yorker* leadership regarding the danger of public ignorance about nuclear weapons: “White and his colleagues often expressed concern about the way people simply accepted the bomb as an inevitability,” while contributors “attributed lay men and women's passive acceptance of an atomic future to a lack of awareness.”⁹⁴ It follows, then, that Hersey's report was published in an attempt on the part of the *New Yorker* leadership to bring greater awareness of the impact of the bomb to their readers *in the*

⁹¹ Americans were opposed to nuclearism in general but supported nuclear weapons use when it was framed as the “lesser of two evils” in the face of “Soviet aggression.”: Lifton and Falk 222.

⁹² Initial reports from the Pentagon regarding the bombing of Hiroshima, released the next morning, August 7, 1945, referred to the “birth of a new age—The Age of Atomic Energy,” revealing the premeditated nature of the description of the bombing as a historical turning point: Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995) 10.

⁹³ Ross's August 7, 1946 letter to White went on to say that Shawn believed “we are the people with a chance to do it, and probably the only people that will do it, if it is done” (quoted in Yagoda 183).

⁹⁴ Corey 30. Corey also asserts, in confirmation of Ross and his peers' view of their role in the press: “American periodicals played a significant role both in forming and tabulating public opinion about the dawn of the atomic age” (20).

service of jolting them out of uncomplicated acceptance of nuclear weapons use. The painstakingly narrated reportage of the Japanese experience of the bombing was a direct attack on the propaganda and censorship campaigns that, as we saw in the previous section, were designed to *produce* the public acceptance that the *New Yorker* leadership uncritically thought of as existing passively.

Historian Mary F. Corey describes pre-*Hiroshima* coverage of the atomic bombings in the *New Yorker* as similar to other press sources “in its scope and immediacy, but not in content.”⁹⁵ While the official US government stance spread by major news sources highlighted the A-bombs’ effectiveness at ending the war and saving American lives and downplayed their new destructiveness, the “*New Yorker*’s editorial voice at once argued mournfully for world federation as the only hope for a planet threatened by nuclear extinction and ridiculed the official language for the nuclear age.” Corey notes that the *New Yorker* was not alone in its “fear and loathing at the new prospect of a nuclear age,” but it had the largest audience of any of the more nuclear-skeptical magazines.⁹⁶ It stoked, participated in, and guided its readers in the developing nuclear debate. As such, the publication of *Hiroshima* was not entirely a break from typical *New Yorker* nuclear/war coverage, but it did depart significantly enough from previous pieces to attempt to jolt readers into awareness.

The role *Hiroshima* played as a vehicle for public awareness and its adversarial relation to the dominant narrative are what I am calling its *informative* antiwar function. Hersey’s essay explicitly mentions a US policy of censorship, noting that the Japanese scientific community determined the atomic nature of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki “long before the

⁹⁵ Corey 20.

⁹⁶ Corey 21.

American public had been told” (108).⁹⁷ While the events of Hersey’s report take place within the borders of Japan, the purpose of the report is to transport these experiences across the Pacific as part of the telling that, the report itself reminds us, had been thus far denied to the American public. *Hiroshima*, therefore, is geared most directly towards US readers, a fact which is indicated not only by the placement of the essay in the *New Yorker* magazine but also by moments in the text when an aspect of Japanese culture is accompanied by an explainer that would only be necessary for a non-Japanese audience.⁹⁸ For instance, at the moment of the initial blast, Dr. Sasaki is said to have “ducked down on one knee and said to himself, as only a Japanese would, ‘Sasaki, *gambare!* Be brave!’ (20). This description bears evidence of editorializing on behalf of Hersey or one of the *New Yorker* staff—rare for the piece, which generally employs a style suggesting immediacy and objectivity—in the inclusion of a description of Sasaki as embodying Japaneseness as well as the translation of his utterance. In this example, the report takes on a pedagogical, anti-racist function: it provides the reader with a cultural education, teaching them how the Japanese as a people respond to military attack and reframing the dominant narrative of Japanese people from suicidal and barbaric to self-consciously brave in the face of certain death.⁹⁹

Hiroshima offers similarly anti-racist pedagogical elements in certain descriptions of crowds of *hibakusha* as zombie-like.¹⁰⁰ Counterintuitive as it may seem, zombie imagery in the

⁹⁷ Following the publication of *Hiroshima*, congratulatory responses to the *New Yorker*—which poured in from readers, government officials, scientists, and fellow members of the media after publication of the essay—praised the magazine’s bravery, indicating that criticism of the US government had been perceived in the text.

⁹⁸ Additionally, an exterior determinant of the report’s exclusion of a Japanese audience was the US Army of Occupation, whose censorship policies “effectively kept Hersey’s *Hiroshima* from being distributed in Japan”: Norris 199. US occupying forces did so by holding up the decision to censor or permit the distribution of *Hiroshima* in Japan until 1949: Monica Braw, “Atomic Bombs,” *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones, Vol. 1 (London & Chicago: Fitzroy & Dearborn Publishers, 2001) 126. For more on US censorship in occupied Japan, see Smith and Monica Braw, *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan* (Armonk, NY & London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc. 1991).

⁹⁹ This example from the text also counters readings of the six main characters of *Hiroshima* as “de-racinated” (see Norris 187). Rather, Hersey is deliberately highlighting (albeit arguably stereotyping) a character’s race for effect.

¹⁰⁰ As film scholar Chera Kee writes of both typical zombie portrayals and what she calls “extra-ordinary zombies,” who “go beyond expectations of ordinary zombies,” “ordinary zombies prepare us for a world where humans can be

report serves the purpose of meeting American readers where they are through associations with a popular culture trope and then moves them away from a racist stereotype. For example, at one point in Hersey's narrative, Mr. Tanimoto ferries helpless survivors across the river and carries them higher up the river bank to try to bring them to safety and ease their suffering. "To distinguish the living from the dead was not easy," we are told, "for most of the people lay still, with their eyes open" (36). Yet the crowd is alive in terms of feeling: "hundreds of gruesomely wounded suffered together." Hersey's description of crowds of hibakusha as zombie-like *and* as feeling, especially in the humanizing effect of his detailed reporting on the six main characters (Mr. Tanimoto's actions are heroic) seems to acknowledge the American reader's fear of Japanese zombie-ness while also contesting stereotypes of their inhumanity which served to enable Americans to shrug off their destruction by the bomb.

Hiroshima was a one-of-a-kind publication in terms of both its content and its publication, reach and reception. The original plan to run the report as a four-part series was scrapped in favor of issuing the first-ever single-story edition of the magazine. Forde notes a highly unusual show of industry cooperation in the lead up to the publication of the report:

Various constituents of the commercial media market cooperatively underwrote the widespread circulation of a legally and politically risky report that served community and public interests more than commercial ones, at least in the short run. 'Hiroshima,' they believed, was required reading—a *work of reportage that might even save the world*.¹⁰¹

In what was likely a direct result of this cooperation, *Hiroshima* had the highest reader response rate of any *New Yorker* article, and "no other publication in the American twentieth century was so widely circulated, republished, discussed, and venerated as 'Hiroshima.'"¹⁰²

robbed of their humanity and turned into things, where we are taught to feel no compunction about killing such things or using them as a workforce. Extra-ordinary zombies challenge the logic of being able to strip someone of their humanity": Chera Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017) 3, 17.

¹⁰¹ Forde 564, emphasis added.

¹⁰² Forde 562-3. Reader response statistic is from a 1968 internal *New Yorker* report (Forde 569).

The essay was reprinted and reviewed in other newspapers; released as a book by Alfred Knopf publishers and chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club (and provided to many readers free of charge in another instance of seemingly anti-capitalist moral conviction); and read in full as a four-night ABC radio broadcast. The radio readings were “at Hersey’s insistence...commercial-free and non-dramatic, with no music or sound effects.”¹⁰³ In this way the *aesthetic performance* of the text as an auditory experience mirrored the preference in the written text for description over narrative commentary. In addition, the consumption of the radio and print versions of *Hiroshima* share a collectivizing effect, wherein the act of reading or listening to the report may take place alone, as an individual experience, the reader/listener retains the knowledge that they are part of a score of reader/listeners taking in the same story.¹⁰⁴

Janice Radway describes the Book-of-the-Month Club as having “fostered the definition of an imagined community of general readers” who were “understood to be captivated by books.”¹⁰⁵ The distribution of *Hiroshima* as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, then, was both premised upon and productive of a sense in readers of connection with fellow Americans in the discovery of the effects of the atomic bomb. Whether such a *feeling* of connectedness would be accompanied by some form of collective action, however, is by no means guaranteed. In fact, Radway provides an explanation for how *Hiroshima* and other texts like it could have affective impact on readers in a way that *discouraged* collective political action: “Middlebrow books may have endowed us with an ample and refined vocabulary for articulating and achieving affective states, but too often the solution they ventured with respect to serious social problems involved the

¹⁰³ Forde 570.

¹⁰⁴ Here, I am thinking of the ways in which newspapers—the *New Yorker* and local papers alike—build a sense of community between editorial staff and readers through the publication of letters to the editor, for example. My sense of the radio as a collectivizing medium is informed by Jonathan Flatley’s presentation on “Communist Headphones” at the Wayne State University Humanities Center Conference in April 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 7.

moral, ethical, and spiritual rehabilitation of the individual subject alone.”¹⁰⁶ Radway’s characterization of the interests of Book-of-the-Month Club readers tracks with the understanding by the *New Yorker* editorial leadership of their goal with the “Hiroshima” issue as increasing their readers’ awareness, a personal rather than collective or even necessarily actionable outcome.

Still, some antiwar activism is directly connectable to the publication of *Hiroshima*. Hersey donated his Book-of-the-Month royalties to the American Red Cross and the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists and the royalties from the 1949 Japanese translation of *Hiroshima* to the Peace Center of Hiroshima and the six survivors whose stories are told in the text.¹⁰⁷ Other aspects of the functionality of *Hiroshima* as an antiwar text are more equivocal. Radio coverage of *Hiroshima* by popular radio personalities included “passionate calls to American citizens to join forces in demanding national political action to control atomic power in the world.”¹⁰⁸ Such calls to action are instances of antiwar action spurred on by the text that nonetheless cannot be linked definitively to any measurable political outcome. Similarly, on his first visit to Hiroshima, Pope John Paul II asserted that “to remember Hiroshima is to commit oneself to peace.”¹⁰⁹ As the first published extended report on the people and conditions of postwar Hiroshima, Hersey’s essay immortalized his six “main characters” as well as the collective suffering of the residents of Hiroshima. To accept the Pope’s statement, then, is to classify the immersive act of reading *Hiroshima* as anti-war by definition.

On the part of those readers, however, it must be repeated that neither *Hiroshima* as a text, nor its publication, promotion, or public reception functioned as a call to action, despite the various embedded disapprovals of and oppositions to US military action. Instead, the work served as

¹⁰⁶ Radway 13.

¹⁰⁷ Forde 571-2.

¹⁰⁸ Forde 570.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Lifton and Falk 190.

counter-propaganda, urging a rearrangement of the hegemonic narrative of the atomic bomb. The political potential of the report as a work of anti-censorship that also challenged hegemonic narrative tenets such as anti-Japanese xenophobic disgust and paranoia was not agitational but pedagogical: it taught people who already wanted to consider themselves ethical, enlightened, and worldly to think differently about war than their government instructed them to. But a lack of collective political *action* as a response to the report does not diminish its political, affective capacity, its ability to rearticulate and deepen antiwar beliefs by evoking particular feelings in some segment of the US population. In this way, the production and publication of this sort of descriptive, informational, intimacy-inviting antiwar literature, I argue, can be considered an antiwar action in itself, in large part due to its potential for influencing public mood.

Literary Antiwar Strategies

I want now to engage in a close reading of the literary elements of *Hiroshima* that I identify as contributing form and substance to the antiwar message of the report. The report uses description, dramatic irony, and characterization to represent the bombing of Hiroshima in a way that is designed to affect readers and encourage them to experience certain feelings (this is akin to what Highmore calls “mood-work”). In “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” queer theorist Heather Love defines and advocates for a descriptive reading practice that flattens out, but does not do away with, close reading.¹¹⁰ What Love’s essay helps me to explore in *Hiroshima* is the idea that descriptive writing contains within it a suggestion for interpretation or

¹¹⁰ “Good descriptions,” Love writes, “rather than adding anything ‘extra’ to the description...account for the real variety that is already there.”: Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010) 377. A descriptive reading practice is a “significant departure from the humanist underpinnings of traditional close reading. In particular, by refusing the role of privileged messenger prescribed by hermeneutics and emphasizing instead the minimalist but painstaking work of description, this approach undermines the ethical charisma of the critic”: Love 387.

an invitation for a preferred way of reading.¹¹¹ Love's essay helps me to make determinations about the reading that *Hiroshima* seems to invite with its descriptive style. I argue that *Hiroshima* formally solicits feelings of compassion for the citizens of Hiroshima, in direct contrast to the feelings of distance and disgust encouraged by the anti-Japanese war propaganda discussed earlier, and affirmation of the guilt and anxiety that the report locates in the hyper-propagandized atmosphere of the US at this historical moment. Compassion, guilt, and anxiety are solicited by brutal confirmation of the scope and quality of the devastation caused by the atomic bomb. The way that the report is composed, on the level of form, seems intended to have an antiwar impact that is ultimately reparative for the US public, which would mean that while it sought to impart onto its readers a negative opinion of the bombing and handling of the war by the government, including the propaganda and censorship campaigns, it aimed to do so by leaving readers feeling positively about themselves. The success of the report as ideological contestation depends on its readers' ability to sympathize with the victims Hersey profiles and to be affected by the descriptions of the explosion and aftermath; its underlying logic is that if readers care about human suffering and the truth, as good Americans should, then, having read the report, they can now resolve the anxiety of sensing but not knowing that they had been party to something unprecedentedly ugly that was being shielded from them.

Hersey's report employs dramatic irony and a particular mixture of narration and description in order to encourage a reading experience suffused with feelings such as shock, anxiety, sympathetic compassion, and the strange pleasure literary scholar Marian Eide details in her theory

¹¹¹ In her reading of the infanticide scene in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, Love writes that "although Morrison leaves the interpretation of the scene open, she nonetheless carefully guides the reader through better and worse interpretations of the act." (385). I want to move away from the binary opposition of description and interpretation that Love's essay for the most part maintains, which was most famously established in the literary humanist tradition by Marxist philosopher and novel theorist Georg Lukács in "Narrate or Describe?" (1978).

of the aesthetic category of “terrible beauty,”¹¹² all of which share the capacity for supporting an antiwar position. The editorial staff at the *New Yorker* made decisions about how to publish Hersey’s report that reinforced this reading. Corey notes the ways in which Hersey’s narrative organization worked in tandem with the editorial decision to publish the piece as a full issue of the *New Yorker* to create a new kind of war literature:

Allowing the piece to... explode long-standing *New Yorker* formulaic constraints greatly magnified its moral force. What television news did for Vietnam, Hersey’s account did for atomic warfare. By delivering searing descriptions of how the bombing was experienced by six survivors...Hersey succeeded in raising the specter of American terrorism.¹¹³

Corey ties the textual descriptions to the longform publication of the essay, crediting both formal decisions with a widespread, deeply felt, and antiwar effect on its audience.

Additional paratextual elements of the original publication of the report encouraged readers to go into the essay from a perspective sympathetic to the victims of the bombing and skeptical of the official narrative of the US federal government that the atomic bombs were at once necessary, even life-saving, innocuous in terms of radiation side effects, and akin to incendiary bombing practices generally accepted as a feature of modern warfare. An editorial note prefacing the essay read:

The *New Yorker* this week devotes its entire editorial space to an article on the almost complete obliteration of a city by one atomic bomb, and what happened to the people of that city. It does so in the conviction that few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon, and that everyone might well take time to consider the implications of its use.¹¹⁴

The note does not take an overtly antiwar position, but it does instigate a challenge to the official narrative by asserting that what an American audience knew about the atomic bombs was not the

¹¹² Eide makes the ethical argument that pleasure in represented violence “drives rather than subsumes a *moral engagement* that witnesses to trauma and promises through that witness to assist in the *restoration* of the traumatized”: *Terrible Beauty: The Violent Aesthetic and Twentieth Century Literature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2019) xv, emphasis added.

¹¹³ Corey 37.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Forde 567.

whole story. The descriptions of the power of the bomb as “destructive” and its effect as “obliteration” are strong rejoinders to a narrative of the bombings as merciful—saving lives in a projected calculus of the death toll in a counterfactual in which the Japanese did not surrender following the bombing of Nagasaki *and* killing those it did in a “pleasant” fashion, to quote one US general’s description of death by radiation.¹¹⁵ The note backs off from any explicit antiwar content when it advises readers in a removed and euphemistic manner to think hard about the “implications” of nuclear weapons and does not make a value judgment regarding the atomic bomb or say that it should not have been used.

This retreat from editorial assertion is similar to Hersey’s almost entirely by-the-book third-person omniscient narration in *Hiroshima*.¹¹⁶ Historian Michael Lucken reads the precision of the opening sentence of the report as placing Hersey’s text more in line with the records of bureaucrats and soldiers than those survivors who would go on to publish narrative testimonials.

Hiroshima begins:

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6th, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department at the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk. (1)

Yet while Lucken interprets Hersey’s intent as one of “plac[ing] the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a minutely detailed and precisely timed framework,” he acknowledges the mood-work

¹¹⁵ General Leslie R. Groves to Congress in 1945: “in fact, they say it [radiation sickness] is a very pleasant way to die” (quoted in Lindqvist 115 and by historian Michael J. Yavenditti in “John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of ‘Hiroshima,’” *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 1 [Feb. 1974]: 27). Additionally, Yavenditti writes that Major Alexander P. de Seversky put forth the argument that the reason so many houses and buildings in Hiroshima were destroyed had nothing to do with the force of the atomic bomb and rather was a result of Japanese building practices, which had produced flimsy structures (28).

¹¹⁶ Sanders argued that being opinionated would have “weakened Hersey’s effort to make readers understand what had happened,” when the selection and organization of interview material into the essay was “intrusive enough” (15).

of the report.¹¹⁷ The opening sentence of the report is a perfect example of its dual commitment to providing exact information about the event and an account that emphasizes the (common) humanity of the victims of the bomb. The reliance on description rather than overt authorial or narrational interjections is less a matter of allowing the reader to form their own opinions than of signaling to the reader that they are being *trusted* to come to a conclusion, providing the reader with a sense of respect and responsibility.

Literary Journalism

Scholars have noted the rhetorical impact of the style of the report, deeming *Hiroshima* a precursor of New Journalism and the nonfiction novel.¹¹⁸ Corey called it a “masterful piece of social realism,”¹¹⁹ which brings up a tension between the literary aspects of the essay and its status as a piece of journalism: does the ethos and emotional impact of the report come from its construction as a narrative or as a report, or as some combination of the two? Hersey himself wrote, “I have always believed that the *devices* of fiction could serve journalism well and might even help it to aspire now and then to the level of art. But I have tried to honor the distinction between the two forms.”¹²⁰ While this quote indicates that Hersey thought of his reportage as having the potential to provide an aesthetic experience as an artwork if he employed certain formal techniques, it also shows that he saw journalism and fiction as separate categories of writing and suggests that he viewed his own articles and novels as distinct in form and function. Frus reminds us of the social and historical construction of the literature/journalism divide and argues against

¹¹⁷ The “terse language and abrupt tone are designed primarily to underline the trauma suffered”: Michael Lucken, *The Japanese and the War: Expectation, Perception, and the Shaping of Memory*, trans. Karen Grimwade (2013: New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) 231.

¹¹⁸ Journalism scholar Ben Yagoda describes Hersey’s writing style in *Hiroshima* as “matter-of-fact and lucid, with the simple sentences punctuated by the occasional well-chosen adjective” (191).

¹¹⁹ Corey 36.

¹²⁰ Hersey, “The Legend on the License,” quoted in Sanders 1.

the commonsense idea that literary realism owes its status as a respectable genre to its association with journalistic objectivity.¹²¹ How does the combination of literary and journalistic formal techniques affect *Hiroshima*'s ability or potential to counter state propaganda?

One example of the way in which the report uses its hybrid genre to propel its antiwar argument is in its establishment of journalistic credibility through a series of literary scenes involving main characters' opinions about the authority of newspapers. Several of the six main characters are introduced reading newspapers as part of their daily activities—Kleinsorge reading German-language paper *Stimmen der Zeit* ["The Mood of the Era"], Mrs. Nakamura reading local Hiroshima paper *Chugoku*, Dr. Fujii reading the Osaka daily *Asahi*—which would mirror the activity of the audience of the *New Yorker*.¹²² Public trust in the newspaper as an authoritative informational source, particularly with regard to accurate reporting about the atomic bomb, is complicated by two scenes that fall close together in *Hiroshima*. The first sees Father Cieslik relay an incorrect conclusion about the nature of the bomb—"he had the secret on the best authority"—and Dr. Fujii believe it, "perfectly satisfied, since after all the information came from a newspaperman" (51). Because Cieslik's intel turns out to be false, this exchange and the smug "after all" imply an ironic view of total trust in the press. Second, in a summative description of the aftermath of the bombing, *Hiroshima* asserts that the cultural authority of newspapers and their failure to report details led to a pervading lack of knowledge about what had happened as well as mistrust of new information and the spreading of disinformation:

A vague, incomprehensible rumor reached Hiroshima—that the city had been destroyed by the energy released when atoms were somehow split in two...No one understood the idea or put any more credence in it than in the powdered magnesium and such things.

¹²¹ Rather, "fictional objectivity is better seen as both a reaction to the commodification of artistic production and an expression of it": Frus xviii. Frus continues by noting a relation between fiction's adoption of seeming objectivity and the obscuring of labor under capitalism.

¹²² The descriptions of *Chugoku* and *Asahi* in the essay also function as indicators of its intended US/non-Japanese audience because Japanese readers would not require explainers about the newspapers.

Newspapers were being brought in from other cities, but they were still confining themselves to extremely general statements. (53)

The information vacuum created by the vagueness of news reports (news agencies themselves being constrained, as previously discussed, by official and unofficial US government censorship policies) resulted in a seeming equivalency between baseless theories (powdered magnesium was thought to have been dumped from airplanes to start massive fires) and scientific evidence of the nuclear fission that had in fact caused the unprecedented destruction at Hiroshima. Without any confirmation or debunking taking place in the newspapers, conspiracy theories seemed plausible, atomic radiation seemed like just another conspiracy theory itself, and survivors in Hiroshima lost faith in all information regardless of its source. This pattern of events shares some elements with US press coverage of the atomic bombs and “Victorian” public attitudes leading up to the publication of *Hiroshima*. If a rhetorical function of the discussion of newspapers as central sources of information in *Hiroshima* is to develop credibility of the text as a newspaper report itself, then describing the breakdown of trust in media reports would seem to undercut that credibility. Rather, it reads as acknowledging the inadequacy of existing news coverage, validating the nebulous paranoia its readers may have felt about not being told the full story, and presenting the quantity and quality of detail within *Hiroshima* as a necessary corrective to the dominant media narrative.

Importantly, *Hiroshima* is not only a successful example of well-crafted journalism; it employs literary devices of dramatic irony and foreshadowing, characterization, and a distinct combination of narrative and description to produce a novelistic reading experience. The reading experience was novelistic, rather than short-story-esque as conventional narrative journalism might be described, due in large part to the publication of the essay in its entirety as a standalone

issue of the *New Yorker* (and, soon after, as an Alfred A. Knopf book).¹²³ Had the editorial leadership at the *New Yorker* published *Hiroshima* as a four-part series, as was their original plan, the essay may have put readers in mind of 19th century serialized novels. As it is, Hersey's report was not completely without precedent in terms of its literary style.¹²⁴ Still, by stepping outside familiar reading experiences such as the serialized novel and established Reporter at Large segments in the *New Yorker*, Hersey shows readers that they can learn about current events, moral issues, and violence in a new way, from a novelesque narrative based entirely in investigative reporting.

Dramatic Irony

Form also influences the ways in which the narrative is able to arouse suspense and tension. *Hiroshima* begins, as we saw, by pinpointing the moment of explosion and goes on to list what each of the six main characters of the essay were doing at the moment of the “noiseless flash” before rewinding to follow some of them through their unsuspecting daily morning routines. By beginning with the exact time of the bombing and backtracking through each survivor's morning with markers indicating how close we are getting to the bomb (e.g., “at 8 o'clock...”) the form of the narrative creates foreshadowing for an event the reader knows has happened. The dramatic irony in the text has layers: it is present meta-textually in describing to an audience in August 1946, who would have been well aware of the *fact* of the atomic bombing on August 6, 1945 if not the on-the-ground details, the morning routines of unknowing citizens of Hiroshima, and also

¹²³ Forde cites empirical evidence that the essay's literariness affected the reading experience, noting that over one-third of the 400-plus reader responses received by the *New Yorker*, of which over 90% were favorable, “praised Hersey's masterful storytelling, a response indicating the significance of literary form in the report's remarkable public impact.” (569).

¹²⁴ Reporting during World War II, Walter Bernstein, an infantry soldier, “submit[ted] longer dispatches to the *New Yorker* that, with their superb dialogue and well-constructed scenes, stretched the definition of magazine journalism”: Yagoda 176. Yagoda also credits Janet Flanner's 1943 three-part account of Mary Reynolds' struggle to return to US from occupied Paris “as the 1st long, straight ‘reconstructed’ narrative the magazine had printed,” which “paved the way for the better-known efforts of John Hersey” (180).

within the essay itself, as the bomb is revealed to the reader before it is experienced by the characters.¹²⁵ Forde points out the literary impact of last-minute revisions to remove moments of narrative omniscience and to link the narrative “precisely to the passing of time from the moment the bomb dropped,” which combined to “enhance[] the detailed, seemingly neutral and objective nature of Hersey’s account of the bomb’s *human impact* and heightened the *horror of the reading experience*.”¹²⁶ I would argue that Hersey’s manipulation of the narrative timeline is an example of the desire of the report to provoke in readers an aesthetic (affective) experience rather than to serve solely as a journalistic vehicle for distributing objective information. The literary strategies by which the report attempts to address its readers on an affective level is what enables the potential for a reparative antiwar reading experience based in the particular triangulation of compassion, guilt, and anxiety I am mapping.

From the beginning, the form of the narrative builds a feeling of dread in the reader to mimic the dread the people of Hiroshima felt, knowing that they would be bombed sometime soon. The second paragraph of the essay explains the rationale for this dread, which the reader, with the benefit of a post-atomic vantage point, would know was well-founded: the “frequency of the warnings and the continued abstinence of Mr. B [the Japanese nickname for US bomber planes] with respect to Hiroshima had made its citizens jittery; a rumor was going around that the Americans were saving something special for the city” (2). Descriptions of the characters’ expectations of approaching danger have two functions: for one, they are sociological facts gathered, we can assume, through Hersey’s interviews with survivors and it is significant to have

¹²⁵ Additionally, the text argues that there was no warning of the bomb. The sentences immediately before the first prolonged description of the bomb are: “There was no sound of planes. The morning was still; the place was cool and pleasant” (8). The use of the adjective “pleasant” to describe the immediate preconditions of the explosion is discordant and may serve to stir up discomfort for the reader.

¹²⁶ Forde 566, emphasis added.

a record of what the common assumption at the time right before the bomb was, but at the same time, they act literarily in the service of dramatic irony (they thought X would happen, but we know in fact Y would take place). Additionally, the narrative sets up its positionality with the phrase the “Americans were saving something special.” “Americans” are not written as “we,” which signals that Hersey’s narrator is not identifying with a solely American audience, and at the same time, the “Americans” is not written as the “American government/military,” which implies complicity on the part of the entire US citizenry in the (“special,” which might be taken as malicious or even sadistic) decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.¹²⁷

In a preview of the way in which Hersey’s six survivors will come to stand in for atomic bomb victims on the whole, the same paragraph notes that “Mr. Tanimoto, like all his neighbors and friends, was almost sick with anxiety” (2). The reader is not able to be completely swept up in a *mimetic* response to the characters’ pervasive anxiety because they were already told in the opening sentence exactly when and how the city was bombed, but the anxiety in the text is transformed into dread *for* the characters. The sympathetic dread fostered from the start of the report seems designed to resonate with the pervasive mood of paranoid anxiety produced by the US propaganda and censorship campaigns.¹²⁸ Such resonance makes possible both the recognition of guilt at the source of what seemed to be paranoid anxiety (but is now revealed to be justifiable) and a sympathetic connection to the *hibakusha* despite the anti-Japanese ideological work that would have deterred such a connection.

¹²⁷ There are two ways to read this implied complicity. One is that Hersey’s narrator asserts it as a fact. Another is that the narrator is simply reporting the dominant narrative at that historical moment in Japan.

¹²⁸ As Highmore shows in his case study of British governmental “mood management” via Ministry of Information propaganda during World War II, effective propaganda reflects back what its audience is already feeling rather than telling them what to feel or that what they are feeling is wrong (54-74). I see Hersey taking a similar tack here.

Characterization and the Enormity Effect

If, as I contend, the aim in *Hiroshima* is to represent the experience of the atomic bombing on Hiroshima's population on a human level and a grand scale, then the six main characters are meant to stand in for the *hibakusha* population in a manner similar to the Victorian novel character-development practice that Levine names the "enormity effect."¹²⁹ The report takes the form of a largely chronological narrative that describes experiences of survival in the immediate aftermath of the bombing by shifting back and forth to focus on the perspectives of six main "characters": Christian pastor and neighborhood association delegate Mr. Tanimoto, German Jesuit priest Father Kleinsorge, widowed mother Mrs. Nakamura, physicians Dr. Sasaki and Dr. Fujii (who also owns a small hospital), and badly injured Miss Sasaki (no relation to Dr. Sasaki).¹³⁰ Choosing to profile six survivors rather than a single heroic figure does some of the work to show atomic bomb victims' experience as multiple rather than monolithic, as does portraying each of the six as well-rounded and sympathetic characters, with identities beyond *hibakusha*: readers learn about their personalities, what they care about, what they were doing before the blast, the pain they experienced, and their selfless acts in the assistance of other survivors and the dead. Importantly, the six characters are all civilians, which is the primary method Hersey uses to counter official statements labelling the city a military. Aestheticizing the simple fact that civilians were the victims of the atomic bombs attempts to confirm the legitimacy of readers' anxious and guilty consciences, which government officials divulged by digging into the "military target" argument.

¹²⁹ Through the use of character types "to imply the many through the one," Levine writes, the "single sympathetic case is generalized to suffering on a mass scale": (68, 67). Wyatt makes a related case in his discussion of Hersey's report: "Human scale: this is what literature returns us to. It gives us, however mythic or ironic its dimensions, man as a measure of the world" (158).

¹³⁰ Of course, it is important to state upfront that these "characters" are actual people interviewed by Hersey. Interestingly, in *Hiroshima*, Hersey does not allude to these interviews or quote any of the dialogue between himself and the *hibakusha*; in this way, the six main interviewees function as characters in the narrative Hersey has produced based on their interviews and others (Hersey having conducted interviews of more than thirty residents of Hiroshima altogether).

The scope and quality of civilian casualties only had to be obfuscated because of the commonsense understanding that bombing civilians was wrong. The enormity effect functions in the report to take the characters' representative nature a step further toward the grand scale.

Significant themes of the essay itself include feelings, trauma, community, and the bomb as sublime in nature. Throughout the essay, the six main characters are described in terms of their feelings. They are said to feel jittery, bewildered, apathetic, curious, tired, uneasy, sickened, embarrassed, angry, stupefied, dazed, dismayed, surprised, guilty and ashamed. On Hersey's research trip to Hiroshima, he recalls that he "was 'terrified all the time,'" putting the question to himself, "if I felt that coming there eight months later, what must the feelings of the people who were there at the time have been?"¹³¹ Showing that feelings and a potential for empathy were central to Hersey's production of the report, he concluded that it was the "struggling effort to understand what they must have felt that produced whatever I was able to produce."¹³² Simply by giving the feelings of Hiroshima survivors space on the page, the narrative shows that individual peoples' feelings are worthy of concern. This is of political importance when contextualized within a historical moment whose official narrative of Japanese people was that they were monstrous and deserving of US loathing and revenge rather than concern or empathy.¹³³

A final literary approach to centering the feelings of Hiroshima survivors in the narrative of the aftermath of the bomb is repeatedly narrated speculation about characters' physical feelings of pain, which invite the reader to engage in mimesis, an imagining of what it must have been like to experience said pain. Of an injured woman that Mr. Tanimoto comes across in the river, the

¹³¹ Lifton and Mitchell 87.

¹³² Hersey in *Antaeus Report*, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell 87, footnote 84.

¹³³ As Ben Yagoda notes, the "article managed to do something nearly impossible: it took some people from a nation that had been collectively vilified as 'Japs' for the past 5 years and presented them as recognizing able, sympathetic human beings...and by doing so, it made it immeasurably harder for Americans to ignore the terrible weapon that had been unleashed on the world" (191-192).

omniscient narrator notes, the “salt water must have been excruciatingly painful to her” (38). Soon after, Father Kleinsorge carries an injured fellow priest, and the narrator echoes, the “wooden litter must have been terribly painful for Father LaSalle, in whose back scores of tiny particles of window glass were embedded” (41). The repetition of the phrasing intensifies the insistence with which the reader is urged to sympathize with two of the hundreds of thousands of casualties. Mimesis being a mirrored feeling, a one-to-one relation, is not quite what is happening in general when *Hiroshima* encourages readers to imagine the experience of the *hibakusha*; that is a more diffuse sympathetic relation. However, the specific examples above of the text evoking the imagined sensation of pain do rest on a mimetic relationship between the character and the reader, who also has a body that can feel pain. This phrasing, “must have been terribly painful,” prods the reader to recognize the shared sense of existing in a body, of being vulnerable to pain.

This relationship counters the disembodied nature of casualty statistics, and these moments in the report are examples of the way that *Hiroshima* combines literary description and characterization in order to hook and maintain a precise degree of attention of the reader, confronting them with the suffering and description caused by the explosion while relying on the generic comfort embedded in the narrative form to keep readers from becoming overwhelmed. I am not arguing that the promotion of compassion I am locating in characterization is necessary for US readers to think of *hibakusha* as human beings like themselves. Rather, in light of the anti-Japanese nationalist propaganda, I see these literary examples as providing a manner for absorbing in a particular way the knowledge of lives that the US public had been primed to believe was subhuman because they did not experience feelings.

Description

What is the political impact of the descriptions of individual and collective Japanese death, suffering, and survival of the atomic bomb, that pinnacle of American militarism, in *Hiroshima*? If the form of the narrative makes a claim about the experiences it reports, how do we discern the affective response that it anticipates or intends to evoke in its readers? To critically speculate upon the answer to this question with regard to *Hiroshima*, we might, following Love, read the form of the text itself as performing a descriptive reading of the experiences of survivors in Hiroshima. Such a reading would be rendered in the text as a de-prioritization of the figure of the reporter as narrator of the event and aftermath. Hersey is noticeably absent from the narrative; he does not report his interviews with the survivors as dialogue between two people, choosing instead to weave the experiences and feelings they report to him into a nearly-omniscient narrative of the moments and days following the bombing. For Hersey, the human baseline at play in the text is care and concern for others; that is, rather than position the reporter as voice of authority with regard to the moral argument at hand, the text operates on the assumption that descriptions of the violent effects of the atomic bomb will upset readers because they care about and oppose human suffering.

Love posits that description can be both de- and re-humanizing.¹³⁴ A simple reading of *Hiroshima* is that by framing the essay around the stories of six survivors, Hersey humanizes *hibakusha* to a US audience. Can such a reading be combined with one that follows Love in understanding the flat descriptions that make up *Hiroshima* as making legible the dehumanization of war as evinced by the material effects of its (at the time) ultimate instrument, the atomic bomb?

¹³⁴ Love's example of description's simultaneous dehumanizing and re-humanizing potential is that while existing scholarship on *Beloved* views the "objectivity of the perspective" in the infanticide scene as serving to "call[] attention to the horror of Sethe's act," it "also makes legible material processes of dehumanization." Methodologically, then, Morrison "conveys the horrors of slavery not by voicing an explicit protest against it but by describing its effects": Love 386.

Love also distinguishes between two purposes of writing—registering versus repairing the losses of history. Might this distinction be a helpful way of thinking about potentially various ways in which antiwar literature can function? Is registering the “horrors of war” in and of itself antiwar? If descriptive writing can be read as having the effect of registering historical trauma, then *Hiroshima* is a veritable archive of the losses that occurred as a result of the US military decision to drop the first atomic bomb on the title city. Close, descriptive reading can show how the composition of the text functions affectively.¹³⁵ A larger goal of the close readings in this section, therefore, is to think through the affective resonances of aesthetic experience in antiwar texts, taking *Hiroshima* as a case study.

One of the most contested aspects of *Hiroshima* as a literary text is the understatement resulting from its descriptive style. Corey labels Hersey’s writing style in *Hiroshima* “spare, unemotional prose.”¹³⁶ Some critics have less neutral opinions of Hersey’s prose; for example, Dwight MacDonald critiqued Hersey’s report for what he viewed as its “moral deficiency” and “antiseptic” prose.¹³⁷ Norris reads “Hersey’s factualism” as in line with and instantiating of the dominant narrative pushed by the US government.¹³⁸ While I disagree with Norris’s overall

¹³⁵ Many scholars describe Hersey’s writing in *Hiroshima* as “descriptive” but largely do so in a general and perfunctory manner, sometimes citing the moving quality of a single anecdote from the report, that of Father Kleinsorge comforting a group of soldiers who have had their eyes burned out by the initial flash of the bomb. David Sanders’s revised monograph on Hersey’s life and works is one exception in that it performs a quick literary analysis of multiple parts of the narrative: David Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991). Norris critiques *Hiroshima* as flattening the lived experiences of *hibakusha*, setting the report up as an example in contrast to her reading of Yoko Ota’s *City of Corpses* (1990).

¹³⁶ Corey 36.

¹³⁷ “Naturalism,” MacDonald suggested, “was no longer adequate ‘either aesthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horrors’”: *Politics*, Oct/Nov 1946, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell 89. Frus makes an argument that contains shades of MacDonald’s complaint of moral deficiency: “Hersey’s detached, neutral style exploits its subjects as much as objective fiction does, and because Hersey refuses to analyze or consider his relation to his subjects, we end up with a depoliticized journalism that reproduces the way things are” (95).

¹³⁸ Norris argues that *Hiroshima* “underwrote the US’s ongoing treatment of Hiroshima as a scientific and military event with material and logistical disruptions as the predominant interest” (191) and the “nation’s strong investment in a humanitarian self-image mandated strategies of reporting whose objectivity created the illusion of unsentimental rationality while deflecting tacit accusations (including self-accusations) of brutality” (182).

conclusion, her point about the practice of self-censorship (what we might today call tone-policing) helps make clear the resistance work that is being done at moments in the narration of *Hiroshima* that break from an appearance of purely objective reporting to speculate on characters' thoughts and feelings. I understand the primary concern of Hersey's report to be the suffering and surviving of *people*, which is incompatible with a government narrative that privileges material and logistical concerns, and I read the seemingly objective tone that pervades the piece as a literary use of understatement designed to function as a point of connection between the political deployment of irony and of description.

Understatement in the context of reporting on destruction so vast in scale as to be seemingly incalculable and infinite produces an ironic effect, as in this description of the hours preceding the bombing: the "morning was perfectly clear and so warm that the day promised to be uncomfortable" (7). The description of the environmental setting as "perfectly clear" stands in opposition to the absolute devastation the reader knows is imminent. At the same time, the seemingly benign detail of the oncoming discomfort of hot temperatures contrasts jarringly with the reader's foreknowledge of the unimaginably severe suffering the residents of Hiroshima are about to experience. Later in the narrative, after the bomb has exploded, the following sentence demonstrates the ability for understatement to serve both a descriptive and ironic function: "Some of the wounded in Hiroshima were unable to enjoy the questionable luxury of hospitalization" (23). In the previous section, the reader learned that the hospital had six hundred beds, that the beds and staff were completely decimated, and that more than ten thousand people were in the process of converging on the hospital seeking treatment. In this context, "some" reads as a glib or cynically ironic understatement of the magnitude of the problem of insufficient resources for a medical response to the destructive effects of the bomb.

As a literary device in the service of description, understatement works to both de-individualize, zooming out as in the sentence about the “wounded” quoted in the previous paragraph, and re-individualize the effects of the bomb. The reduction of the numerous casualties to a brief collective statement is a repeated tactic in the report, such as in the following sentence, where the wounded are not only described imprecisely as simply “many,” but also *in the description itself* take up a small part of the full sentence:

The hospital was in horrible confusion: heavy partitions and ceilings had fallen on patients, beds had overturned, windows had blown in and cut *people*, blood was spattered on the walls and floors, instruments were everywhere, *many of the patients were running about screaming, many more lay dead.* (13, emphasis added)

The victims are de-individualized, and furthermore objectified, inhabiting the same semantic position in the descriptive list as instruments, beds, and blood.

At other points in the narrative, as mentioned earlier, the report takes pains to provide up-to-date casualty statistics, previously unreleased to the US public. Yet this data is provided in a manner that formally reduces a hundred thousand deaths to one or even half of a sentence, as in: “In a city of two hundred and forty-five thousand, nearly a hundred thousand people had been killed or doomed at one blow; a hundred thousand more were hurt” (22), and: “A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors” (1).¹³⁹ The narrative repeats the reminder of the exceptionalism of the six named survivors less explicitly later in the text, noting straightforwardly that “thousands of people had nobody to help them,” and then, in a new paragraph, zooming in to the individual event of Jesuit priests giving thanks to God “for the care they had received,” driving home implicitly what the reader has already been told, which is that only the smallest percentage of survivors were fortunate enough to receive immediate medical care.

¹³⁹ This information is repeated as the caption of the only image in the *New Yorker* issue: “A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb. Survivors wonder why they lived when so many others died.”

In contrast to the summative, big-picture use of understatement discussed above, *Hiroshima* is also rife with understated descriptions of individual experiences of the physical effects of the bomb. While it might seem as though individualizing the impact of the bomb could have a minimalizing effect, it is in general more often a vehicle for moving the reader to an affective response.¹⁴⁰ Sanders argued that both *Hiroshima* and Hersey's 1942 book *Men on Bataan* demonstrate the author's "urgent effort—amounting to a duty—to report what he had not seen by a strenuously sympathetic effort to understand the testimony of those who had."¹⁴¹ Re-individualizing *hibakusha* specifically functions as a humanizing corrective in the historical context of censorship and anti-Japanese racism. Paragraphs like the following, where crowds of victims are described on a more detailed level than the zoomed-out descriptions above, might seem recognizable now—after many other descriptions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been made public—as familiar imagery of the physical effects of the atomic bombs. In 1946, though, they were among the very first descriptions of the effects of atomic radiation on the human body:

The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns...Almost all had their heads bowed, looked straight ahead, were silent, and showed no expression whatsoever. (25-26)

Such imagery depicts *hibakusha*, again, as zombified, creating some cognitive dissonance between the humanizing effect of a zoomed-in, individualized descriptive practice and the dehumanizing effects of the bomb as described. Dupont reads the expressionlessness described in the above excerpt psychoanalytically, as symptomatic of trauma, and formally, as mirrored by Hersey's flat prose, which is capable of evoking dread and guilt in its readers.¹⁴² Another description of

¹⁴⁰ Susan D. Moeller, in a study of wartime photojournalism, wrote that the "transformation of mass calamity into individual people and incidents arrests the viewers": quoted in Smith 202.

¹⁴¹ Sanders 4.

¹⁴² Dupont writes that the "complete absence of expression on the survivors' faces...seems to be consciously mirrored in the complete absence of stylistic ornamentation, as though the collective numbing derived from the

immediate effects of radiation comes when Mr. Tanimoto is attempting to aid victims in crossing a river and “reached down and took a woman by the hands, but her skin slipped off in huge, glove-like pieces. He was so sickened by this that he had to sit down for a moment” (38). The literary quality of this description invites the reader to mimic Mr. Tanimoto’s sickened pause, something about the word choice adding to the horror of this imagery. The alliteration of “skin slipped” as opposed to, for example, the skin “fell” off or “came” off, perhaps, or the description of the skin as “glove-like,” which produces a feeling of the uncanny: hand skin is shaped like a glove, but it should not be removable like a glove, and it is the removal of the skin that produces horror, disgust, and sympathetic identification (I am most affected by this description because I too have hands that I am now imagining the skin slipping off of). Significantly, the narrative tells the reader how Mr. Tanimoto feels—sickened—departing from description of solely observable events.¹⁴³ It is worth noting that the call for compassion I am locating in *Hiroshima* says something about its audience: that they require a gripping narrative or poetic sentences to spark a sense of human connection speaks to the anti-Japanese racism and American exceptionalism of the period.

The imagistic quality of some descriptions in *Hiroshima* provide chances for profoundly moving aesthetic experiences on the part of readers as well as pointed critiques of the dominant US narrative about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. An example of the former effect can be seen

shock and the devastation of the bomb could translate into self-imposed stylistic numbing. Nevertheless, Hersey’s restraint did not seek to hide the horror of the bomb. *Hiroshima* was the very first book to shed light on the crude reality of nuclear violence, and the few descriptions of utter devastation such as the one quoted above did impact readers’ minds very strongly. As Steve Rothman puts it: ‘certainly the vivid depictions in the book must have been a strong contributor to a pervasive sense of dread (and guilt) about nuclear weaponry felt by many Americans ever since August 1945.’”

¹⁴³ Such a departure separates Hersey’s descriptive method from that of sociologist Erving Goffman, a key influence on Love’s theory of descriptive reading. Goffman’s method puts “emphasis on visible behavior” with a “refusal to speculate about the psychological roots of human behavior.” And unlike what I argue Hersey’s descriptions invite from the reader, in Goffman’s framework, “both sympathy and censure are beside the point”: Love, “Reading the Social: Erving Goffman and Sexuality Studies,” *Theory Aside*, eds. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014) 241, 254.

in the narration of the process of cremation and identification of the dead. Ashes of individuals whose family cannot be located are placed into envelopes in a room of the Red Cross Hospital for safekeeping due to the cultural importance—explained for a non-Japanese audience—of proper disposal of the dead. “In a few days,” the reader is told, the envelopes filled one whole side of the impromptu shrine” (54). The simple, succinct description of the room full of envelopes of ashes does the work of illustrating the magnitude of death caused by the bomb, as well as the dignity with which the victims manage it. The image of envelopes, piled “neatly and respectfully” into stacks seems intended to provide an aesthetic avenue for the reader to realize, imaginatively, the devastation and death caused by the atomic bomb.

Another description of flowers and moss growing in the rubble of Hiroshima serves as a rejoinder to the dominant media narrative of Hiroshima as a phoenix city, a message that indicated that the use of the atomic bomb was not morally reprehensible because the fear that the city would be uninhabitable for seventy years was not borne out.¹⁴⁴ Miss Sasaki, upon seeing the effects of the bomb on the city for the first time (she had been unconscious due to her injuries when she was transported out of Hiroshima to be treated), experiences the bomb’s impact as incomprehensible:

The sight horrified and amazed her, and there was something she noticed about it that particularly gave her the creeps. Over everything—up through the wreckage of the city, in gutters, along the riverbanks, tangled among tiles and tin roofing, climbing on charred tree trunks—was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush, optimistic green; the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses. Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city’s bones. The bomb had not only left the underground organs of plants intact; it had stimulated them. (91)

The reader may be inclined to mimic Miss Sasaki’s affective response—again, notably written into, indeed framing, the description of the rubble—of horror and amazement at imagining life and death so dramatically stimulated. Again, the form of the description adds to the reader’s affective

¹⁴⁴ Per Lifton and Mitchell, “coverage of Hiroshima focused almost exclusively on rebuilding and regeneration: flower gardens amid the rubble” (79).

experience of the description, as the poetic discourse and personification at play in the phrase “wild flowers were in bloom among the city’s bones” echo the eeriness Miss Sasaki experiences at seeing the positive augmentation of floral life by radiation in direct contrast with the unnaturally accelerated rate of human death.

Conclusion

Corey argues that the literary qualities of *Hiroshima* provided its political impact. “By rendering the effects of the bomb in the language of human tragedy,” she writes, “Hersey managed to shift the terms of the national debate concerning nuclear weapons.”¹⁴⁵ I understand the “language of human tragedy” in the report to include both literary techniques that are readily identifiable as aesthetic devices and, following a Platonic definition of tragedy, mimetic accounts of feelings of pain.¹⁴⁶ In this regard, I agree with Corey’s reading of *Hiroshima*. However, the claim that the essay impacted the national nuclear weapons debate is more difficult to prove, as Corey herself notes, and a shift in debate terms is not necessarily connected to an *antiwar* impact as we are concerned with here.

While Corey writes that “Hersey succeeded in transforming the way many Americans perceived the atom bomb,”¹⁴⁷ she ultimately argues that *Hiroshima* functioned affectively by eliciting a *safe* form of anxiety for a certain class of Americans who were the audience of the *New Yorker*.¹⁴⁸ Complicating Levine’s assertion that the “enormity effect” incites ethical responses to

¹⁴⁵ Corey 36.

¹⁴⁶ Plato asserts in *The Republic* that the “enjoyment of other people’s sufferings has a necessary effect on one’s own”: Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 290, line 606b. The tragedy as form causes its audience to imitate the suffering that they see performed, and imitation leads to action in that it creates a “taste for the being” (74, line 395c), a problem for Plato but a potential payoff of antiwar literature. In the question-heavy dialogue of *The Republic*, this consequence of mimesis is elaborated thus: “Or haven’t you observed that imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought?” (74, line 395d).

¹⁴⁷ Corey 36.

¹⁴⁸ “‘Hiroshima’ both touched a nerve and acted as a balm. However passive the act of reading the essay may have been, it was experienced by many as a form of social activism. The *New Yorker* village seized upon the opportunity

literary works, Corey is right to remind us that any response to *Hiroshima* was not only conditioned by the particular US nationalism of the historical moment but was also class-based. Although reprintings and radio broadcasts of the essay allowed it to reach a broader audience than regular *New Yorker* readers, any speculation about the reception of the essay should take into account the class-based values of the average reader. Corey writes that for the *New Yorker* readers devoted to “key tenets of American pragmatic liberalism,” “enlightenment was in itself a form of social activism.”¹⁴⁹ It follows, then, that feelings such as I have just discussed, when evoked by Hersey’s report, would have been largely interpreted within a framework of obtainment of knowledge and considered an end unto themselves. This supports the formation of the text as counter-propaganda, interested in winning hearts and minds (one could say: minds by way of hearts) away from the hegemonic pro-war ideological position, rather than as agitational literature, meant to solicit action, in this case from a reading audience whose class priorities in effect encourage inaction.¹⁵⁰

Still, there is an argument to be made that *Hiroshima* was a significant antiwar text both in publicizing censored information about the atomic bomb and Hiroshima as well as for its affective impact. Perhaps unexpectedly, I conclude my case for this argument by extending International Relations scholar Nina Tannenwald’s theory of nuclear taboo. Tannenwald credits a “global antinuclear weapons movement” with contributing to the formation of the nuclear taboo as a

to acknowledge its collective feelings of guilt with alacrity”: Corey 38. In a similar vein, Paul Boyer has argued that *Hiroshima* provided catharsis that allowed Americans to “close the book” on the atomic bombings: Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985: Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 209-210.

¹⁴⁹ Corey 18.

¹⁵⁰ Radway offers a hopeful possibility by arguing that reading produces Foucault’s “stigmata of experience,” “marks both on and in a sentient body that forever after bears within it the capacity to respond, to react as that first act of marking had called forth” (13). So, the potential for direct action in response to antiwar literature could be considered still and always already dormant in the reader. In the case of *Hiroshima*, however, contemporary readers seem not to have acted on such a capacity for response, coming up short of what Hersey’s report asks of the reader in terms of compassion with the *hibakusha*. This brings up questions, beyond the scope of this piece but which I hope to address more directly elsewhere in the dissertation, about the gap between pathos and action.

normative element of global geopolitical relations; the taboo is based in moral *revulsion* that makes using nuclear weapons unacceptable.¹⁵¹ I want to emphasize the centrality of the affective element of revulsion to Tannenwald's point, which demonstrates why we must think beyond rational and cognitive factors (deterrence, in the case of the antinuclear weapons movement) when analyzing historical shifts and new political horizons. Tannenwald briefly takes up *Hiroshima*, noting that while "effects of the article are difficult to assess with certainty,...Hersey's vivid depictions likely contributed to a growing sense of dread and revulsion regarding atomic weaponry increasingly felt by many Americans."¹⁵² This reading of *Hiroshima* supports my ongoing argument that the text solicits an antiwar position in its readers by attempting to evoke certain *feelings* via form and content—Tannenwald's dread and revulsion are quite compatible with my triangulation of anxiety, guilt, and compassion. Tannenwald affirms the hopes of the editorial leadership at the *New Yorker*, asserting that "at minimum, the article penetrated a sense of complacency about the bomb that had built up."¹⁵³ We might think of this penetrating function as an anti-war *anti-feeling*, by which I mean a pressure applied against a lack of feeling that was, invisibly yet actively, enabling continued military action and passive societal approval of military activities.

Hiroshima both informs and immerses readers.¹⁵⁴ These are distinct projects undertaken together to represent the impact of the atomic bomb on two scales, human and grand, to several potential ends, all of them oriented in opposition to US militarism: to facilitate greater awareness

¹⁵¹ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 20. With her argument, Tannenwald pushes back against scholarly consensus that solely credits a strategy of deterrence as the "conventional explanation of non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945" (2).

¹⁵² Tannenwald 92-93.

¹⁵³ Tannenwald 93.

¹⁵⁴ In this respect, *Hiroshima* was a quintessential *New Yorker* article. Ben Yagoda lists informative and immersive as two of the *New Yorker's* best qualities: The *New Yorker* "at its best—and it was quite often at its best—had a unique quality in our literary culture. It was mindful of readers, aiming to amuse them, delight them, instruct them, or transport them; it always respected their intelligence and never pandered" (21).

of the consequences of the US military decision to use atomic bombs on two Japanese cities full of civilians (and of nuclear weapons use, period); to aid in the production of discourse, permitting the US public to speak about the atomic bomb; to take the reader out of their removed experience and of the dominant government narrative to open up opportunities for the formation of collectivities with new lines of affiliation. The work of *Hiroshima* takes place not in an explicit call to action or attempt to organize but instead at the level of ideological contestation, disruption and rearticulation.

CHAPTER TWO: ANTIWAR AGENT-VICTIMS: VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR AND THE DRAMATIZATION OF WAR AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Introduction: A Literary Antiwar Movement

Martin Luther King Jr. theorized nonviolent direct action, the hallmark tactic of activism in the Civil Rights movement, as that which “seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”¹ King’s use of the verb “dramatize” is significant; “dramatize” carries the political connotations of exposure and the production of conscience, while it also imparts an aesthetic element to this form of activism by indicating a commonality between direct action protest and theatrical performance. The global antiwar movement that grew in opposition to US military presence in Vietnam on the heels of the Civil Rights movement integrated direct action strategies honed by civil rights activists.² I turn in this chapter to a study of protest performances and poetry that was circulated by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) as part of this antiwar movement and the ways in which literature and protest, aesthetics and politics, informed one another in this historical context.

Because VVAW engaged in explicitly political, antiwar aesthetic practices in a historical moment of urgency (they sought to stop an *ongoing* war rather than critique one that had already ended), pinpointing the particular ways in which they composed their artworks in order to affect their imagined audience helps us better understand practices of “committed art” at the tail end of

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center (1963). <https://www.africa.upenn.edu>. Grassroots organizer and writer L.A. Kauffman used very similar phrasing fifty years later in her history of post-Civil Rights movement American radicalism: “classic direct action playbook: create a crisis that can’t be ignored”: L.A. Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2017) 76. Kauffman quotes King and argues that the Civil Rights movement is the “most important touchstone” for direct action movements of recent decades (xi).

² For instance, the Freedom Singers “established a precedent of using the streets to dramatize their political beliefs,” paving the way for the street theater and guerrilla performances of subsequent countercultural and antiwar groups such as the Diggers and the Guerilla Art Action Group: Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 11.

the politically energized 1960s. I argue that VVAW agitated against the American war in Vietnam by diagnosing it as a social problem through aesthetic practices of performance and poetry that dramatized the war itself as a war crime and themselves as its agent-victims. By turning to a framework of experimental theater theorizations—by Brecht, Artaud, and R.G. Davis in particular—to formally explicate the aesthetic feeling solicited by the multi-generic performance of VVAW agent-victimhood, I make the case that VVAW antiwar aesthetic practices represent a shift in the project of US antiwar literature from an emphasis on the “objective” truth of one’s message, as in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, to the felt immediacy of one’s agency in the collective state violence of US militarism.

Though earlier generations produced large bodies of antiwar protest poetry (the most well-known, perhaps, being written in response to World War I), I turn to the anti-Vietnam war movement in the US as the site of my investigation into questions about overtly political literature for several reasons. First, there is its historical significance: the antiwar movement in the US against military involvement in Vietnam and neighboring Southeast Asian countries was part of a global antiwar movement; it remains the largest antiwar movement in US history; and it is generally considered to have had a significant impact on the timing and nature of US withdrawal from the war.³ Additionally, because of the overlap of the antiwar movement with a swell of broader countercultural movements, the objects of my analysis in this chapter relate to the other antiwar literature objects of this dissertation in terms of their contestation of hegemonic structures. And when it comes to who was voicing these contestations, a focus on the antiwar movement in

³ In a 2017 retrospective of Vietnam War scholarship for *Humanities* magazine, historian Mark Atwood-Lawrence writes that one of the most controversial open questions about the war is: “Could the United States and its South Vietnamese allies have won the war if the American public had not turned against it?”: “Studying the Vietnam War: How the Scholarship has Changed,” *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities* 38.4 (Fall 2017) 16.

this period is significant because, for the first time in US history, veterans protested the war in which they had served while it was still ongoing, to measurable effect.⁴

VVAW members sought to bring about an end to US military presence in Vietnam through two forms of collective art: the first anthology of veterans' antiwar poetry⁵ and a series of choreographed protest performances. In addition to work in electoral politics and grassroots community organizing, the VVAW engaged in direct action protests and published antiwar poetry and fiction through their collectively-owned and operated 1st Casualty Press.⁶ The VVAW used these aestheticized forms of activism to, in King's terms, *dramatize* a social problem.⁷ This chapter seeks answers to the following questions: what does it look like to dramatize the war in Vietnam *as a social problem*, that is, as detrimental to society? And how does such dramatization (a) depend on the specifics of the existing problem and (b) work to affect its intended (imagined) audience?

While the size, scope, and impact of the US antiwar movement against the Vietnam War are all significant factors in my understanding of the function of antiwar literature in this historical situation, I want to attend first and mainly to the unprecedented role of veterans—and the articulation of the veteran subject position at the heart of veteran activism—in this social

⁴ As a *New York Times* article summarized the situation at the time: “President Nixon may claim credit for phasing down the war; Congress may debate a timetable for pulling out; but the fact is that rank-and-file G.I.’s are ending the fighting on their own”: Fred Gardner, “War and G.I. Morale: American Soldiers Rebellious On and Off the Battlefield,” *New York Times* (21 Nov. 1970) 30.

⁵ The first book of poems by a US veteran of the Vietnam War is Dick Shea's *vietnam simply* (1967), and the first US anthology of Vietnam War soldier-poetry is *Boondock Bards* (1968), a “hyper-patriotic, prowar collection”: Adam Gilbert, Adam Gilbert, ““And the fire still burns”: Vietnam War Poetry, Moral Witness, and *Winning Hearts and Minds*,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 25 (2013) 1-34, 4-5.

⁶ An account of VVAW grassroots organizing via regional offices across the country is outside the scope of this essay but nevertheless significant to the groups' work to build public antiwar sentiment. The work VVAW did in terms of providing resources for returning veterans bears some resemblance to the community organizing of the Black Panther Party, which Fredric Jameson holds up as an example of what Vladimir Lenin called “dual power”: Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London and New York: Verso, 2016) 3-4.

⁷ With the use of direct action performance protests, the VVAW agitated against the war through purposefully visual and symbolic methods, joining groups like the Catsonville Nine with their draft card burnings and protests in religious attire and individual activists Nhat Chi Mai and Norman Morrison, who, among others, committed antiwar self-immolation.

movement. VVAW, and other antiwar GI activists, upset the prevailing expectations for how an organized group of US military servicepeople would interact with the American public in a historical moment characterized by mass protests. One needs only to think of the 1970 murders of Kent State students by the Ohio National Guard to conceive of the violent and antagonistic relationship of domestically deployed military units and increasingly militarized police forces to those they were ostensibly dutybound to protect.⁸ At the same time that some veterans were returning from overseas to commit acts of white supremacist terrorism in their home country (continuing the behavior that characterized US military operations in Vietnam, the VVAW would argue),⁹ VVAW members were an organized segment of a growing population of antiwar military personnel.

Writing for the New York-based socialist daily newspaper *The Militant* in late 1970, reporter Dick Roberts summed up growing opposition to the war from Vietnam veterans and active duty servicemembers: “Fighting and dying in a war that they label ‘unjust, illegal and immoral’ is what GIs are most against. More and more they are saying so and acting accordingly. But it is still the tip of the iceberg.”¹⁰ The VVAW occupied the unique space of GI/veteran resistance in the antiwar movement of the Vietnam War: putting forth a call for peace from within the military that was at the same time unsanctioned by U.S. military leadership and so could not claim to speak for

⁸ Stuart Schrader’s history of the rise of counterinsurgency as the preeminent theory of US policing, domestically and internationally, in the Cold War era is helpful for understanding this relationship. “Counterinsurgency’s first principle: it is not only insurgents or criminals who must be pacified, but entire populations”: Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019) 3.

⁹ White Power leader Louis Beam “urged activists to continue fighting the Vietnam War on American soil” via a “literal extension of military-style combat into civilian space”: Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) 3. Belew describes the White Power movement as a social movement (ix). While it shared with VVAW and the antiwar movement an oppositional stance toward the US state and military, believing soldiers had been betrayed and their sacrifices trivialized by US political and military leadership (Belew 3), the White Power movement was decidedly *pro-war*.

¹⁰ Dick Roberts, “Tip of an Iceberg: GI Opposition Surfacing,” *The Militant* 34, no. 42 (13 Nov. 1970) 12. The Militant Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

the military in general.¹¹ A central element of VVAW's method for persuasively communicating their antiwar message was the dramatization—visually, poetically, rhetorically—of their attachment to the military. By explicitly calling themselves “agent-victims” of the war and demonstrating this positionality via form (through the use of military uniforms, medals, marching formations, and jargon) and content (by grounding their aesthetic practices in testimonials about their personal combat experiences), VVAW demonstrated a claim to political agency. Who, they challenged the audiences of their poems and protests, could be more qualified to determine whether the war was worth continuing than those who had been there to fight it?

Through “active identification” as “agent-victims of their own atrocities” (v), both the VVAW protest participants and the veteran-poets who were the authors and frequently also the speakers of the poems in *WHAM (Winning Hearts and Minds)* theorize a form of antiwar attitude dependent on claims to the authority of experience. Such an attitude capitalizes on a US cultural tradition of considering veterans (and this includes veterans considering themselves) as witness-participants to and in the activities of war, who thereby are often seen as possessing a heightened ethos in political discussions about war.¹² As writer and Veterans for Peace member Michael Uhl recalls, “after the Mỹ Lai revelation, the public increasingly was receptive to hearing about what had turned us against the war. Our ranks quickly grew. Even where pro-war support was still

¹¹ VVAW was one particularly organized and longstanding group out of an explosion of antiwar veterans' groups that cropped up during the war. Many were organized around the US and international military bases they served at, with fewer organizing resistance in Vietnam. Per a review published in the *Intercontinental Press* and reprinted in *The Militant* of Fred Halstead's 1970 book *GIs Speak Out Against the War* (Pathfinder Press), which profiles the activities of the Fort Jackson GIs United Against the War in Vietnam, more than sixty antiwar newspapers were being produced by American GIs in this period: Allen Myers, “How to Organize in the Army Against the War,” *The Militant* 34, no. 39 (23 Oct. 1970) 19. The Militant Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹² In her comprehensive study of war writing from the “*Iliad* to Iraq,” Kate McLoughlin argues that “first-hand experience or autopsy is indeed the crucial ingredient of authority, legitimacy and credibility in war reporting”: Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 42.

strong, an ethos prevailed whereby folks who would normally tune out antiwar arguments still might listen to ‘a former soldier who had been there.’”¹³ VVAW and the contributors to *WHAM* self-consciously write (and perform) themselves into this veteran-revering cultural tradition while altering the affective trajectory and moral judgment they seem to want to effect by dramatizing their role as perpetrators of the atrocities of war. Whereas the trench poets of the Great War emphasized their victimization and the villainy of pro-war government leaders, military officers, and women on the home front,¹⁴ *WHAM* insists on centering the agency of the combatants themselves in the violence they committed. Other scholarly analyses of *WHAM* characterizes the anthology as a “poetry of witness” that “confront[s] evil” and “endeavors to speak to and affect us, the reader, in such a way that we, too, may remember and warn” “against complacency.”¹⁵ I argue that such a reading of *WHAM* does not account for the way in which the anthology implicates Vietnam veterans specifically and US citizens more broadly as the *evildoers* and warns—urgently—against not complacency but more accurately a sense that one’s motives are righteous and/or one’s hands clean. While this sharper reading is available for an analysis of *WHAM* on its own, I find that examining the anthology along with the group’s protest performances further highlights the centrality of the “agent” to the “agent-victim” antiwar message VVAW wants to communicate.

Both VVAW poetry and direct action protests sought to construct a collective veteran *attitude*—an assemblage of feelings and beliefs powered by the tension between military

¹³ Michael Uhl, “Veterans Take the Lead in War Crimes Inquiries,” *Waging Peace in Vietnam: U.S. Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed the War*, Ron Carver, David Cortright, and Barbara Doherty, eds. (New York: New Village Press, 2020) 70.

¹⁴ For example, Wilfred Owen famously dedicated his antiwar masterpiece, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” to pro-war journalist and poet Jessie Pope, and Siegfried Sassoon’s “Glory of Women” similarly takes aim most directly at the wives and mothers who supported the war from the home front while remaining ignorant of the extent of carnage they were supporting. Wilfred Owen, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921). Siegfried Sassoon, “Glory of Women,” (Heinemann, 1918).

¹⁵ Gilbert 18.

experiences and enculturation. This attitude then congealed into the formation of an “agent-victim” subject position. Their aesthetic projects—the poetry and protest performances—drew their strength and communicated their antiwar argument by way of the dramatization, via visual, verbal, and other affective cues, of this subject position. For instance, in their performance protests, VVAW signaled their veteran identity by wearing their combat uniforms and using fake guns as props in Operation RAW. The “agent-victim” subject position not incidentally combined a trifecta of visually-coded identity categories—veteran status, masculinity, and whiteness—in order to compel readers of *WHAM* and witnesses of VVAW performance protests to take seriously and actionably their calls to end the war. The “agent-victim” subject position affected how VVAW members oriented themselves toward their audience.¹⁶ By dramatizing their own crises of conscience, VVAW aimed to provoke a shift in the attitudes of their intended audience, a broader swath of the US public, as well.

In my use of the term, I am thinking *attitude* as more feeling-centered than the focus on cognitive or rational functions involved in changing “minds.” If the American and South Vietnamese governments’ adoption of the military strategy of “winning hearts and minds” had to do with pacifying Vietnamese citizens, VVAW reclaimed it with the aim of revealing the hypocrisy of the phrase while organizing direct action protests aimed at similarly moving US citizens to oppose the war via emotion *and* logic.¹⁷ This emphasis on the role of emotion in

¹⁶ I am thinking about the VVAW’s efforts to orient themselves and their imagined audiences as related to what performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan argues is made possible by a clear audience perspective: “Much Western theatre evokes desire based upon and stimulated by the inequality between performer and spectator—and by the (potential) domination of the silent spectator...this account of desire between speaker/performer and listener/spectator reveals how dependent these positions are upon visibility and a coherent point of view. A visible and easily located point of view provides the spectator with a stable point upon which to turn on the machinery of projection, identification, and (inevitable) objectification”: Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993; New York: Routledge, 1996) 165.

¹⁷ Kauffman describes certain activist groups, including Greenpeace, as adopting a “*prophetic* role” in their direct actions with the aim of appealing “to the consciences of millions”: Kauffman 106. The VVAW seems to be doing something similar by seeking to provoke morally outraged sympathy for the Vietnamese population and by staking

sparking and maintaining revolutionary politics had been embraced by San Francisco Mime Troupe (SFMT) director R.G. Davis, who was responsible for popularizing the term “guerrilla theatre” in the late 1960s. Davis theorized the “psychological correspondence between comedy and revolution [as] the pattern wherein *anger and love* combine in a movement toward freedom.”¹⁸ My purpose in bringing up Davis’s theory about the revolutionary comedy performed by the SFMT, whom I will come back to in my reading of VVAW performance protests, is to point out that theories triangulating aesthetic performance, emotion, and revolutionary politics were in the air as VVAW was at the peak of their aesthetic practice and public attention.

By referring to themselves as “agent-victims,” VVAW members meant to convey that they were speaking (or writing) as soldiers who had actively participated in and been damaged by the military violence they now opposed. In much the same way that cultural theorist Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism* that “to reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital,”¹⁹ VVAW actively avowed their part in the violence of the war in order to call for its end. They highlighted their experience of and complicity in the war in order to appeal to a US civilian population whose knowledge and feelings about the war were mediated by official government narratives, physical distance from the warzone, and new technologies including television. They did so by charging the public, in the case of the performative war crimes tribunal called the Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI) put on in Detroit in January 1971, to confront detailed firsthand testimonials of atrocities that were committed against the Vietnamese by their fellow Americans in their names.

their antiwar arguments on the moral authority of veterans whose own consciences had been stricken by their participation in the everyday cruelties that characterize the war.

¹⁸ R.G. Davis, “Comedy and Revolution: Arts in Society, Winter 1969,” *The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Guerrilla Theater Essays: 1* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Mime Troupe, Inc., 1970).

¹⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2009) 15.

Both the cumulative effect of the collective performance of testimony and the collective attitude of vulnerability each participants' act of testifying demonstrated contributed to the way the performance would be received affectively by its audience.

On the whole, I argue that the VVAW engaged in *artistic* forms of political protest that were enabled by the political energy of concurrent social movements with the primary purpose of producing feelings of shocked distress, guilt, and shame in the US public that would 1) destabilize the acceptance of the hegemonic narrative of the war and 2) embarrass the government out of continuing the war.²⁰ VVAW aesthetic practice that served the function of counterhegemonic contestation includes testimony at the WSI, ceremonial rejection of military medals at Dewey Canyon III, and overarching themes of poetry in *WHAM*, which pushed back on dominant cultural assumptions not only regarding the validity and nobility of soldier death as sacrifice—the idea that the value of a soldier's life is different than that of a civilian's—but also on the fact that soldiers were held to a different standard for *valuing* human life, particularly the lives of Vietnamese civilians. These same performances were also overtly designed to embarrass: the WSI testimony served to air the proverbial dirty laundry of the military and to dramatize the hypocrisy of the US as a founding nation of the Geneva Conventions, while the mass rejection of military medals at Dewey Canyon III was a dramatically rendered emphatic repudiation of members' previous allegiance to the US military project, directed at the institutions that bestowed those medals. In my analysis of the WSI, I establish a connection between this VVAW performance and the public tribunals organized by civil rights activists in the 1960s in response to police brutality in Detroit and elsewhere. This connection is one example of the way in which I show that VVAW shared an investment in national self-examination with many social movements of this era (including Civil

²⁰ Another way of viewing the VVAW's poetry and protests is as attempts to shift what Gould has termed the "emotional habitus" of their present moment in order to effect political change.

Rights, the women's movement, anti-imperialist activism, and the broader antiwar movement). Through performance and poetry, VVAW sought to dramatize (a) the level of violence the US military was *at that moment* willfully perpetrating and (b) the relation of guilt and shame that connected soldier to civilian in responsibility for ending the war.

The choice to analyze poetry and protest-as-performance together is less about an exploration of the forms of poetry or performance individually than it is about what their combined engagement by the VVAW can tell us about aesthetic forms' potential to move and persuade. What is the difference between invoking solidarity in poetry versus protests? Are both equally capable of invoking it? When we consider the protests and poetry in terms of their function as agitational—that is, as designed to move people to take some sort of action—we might wonder at the choice by the VVAW to make both. Why would VVAW feel the need to write and publish poetry if they were already organizing successful direct action protests? Does the poetry fill a gap? Can it do something that the protests cannot?

Elsewhere in the dissertation, my readings of primary texts deal in antiwar potential or possibility, but because the VVAW-produced aesthetic objects have antiwar intent explicitly baked into them, they allow for an investigation into a historical occurrence of aesthetic practice in which feeling was purposefully and explicitly politicized as part of an antiwar agenda. In other words, I am investigating how art can *be* as well as *evoke* a protest, and I am doing that by looking at a poetic manifestation and performance manifestation of antiwar feeling. Reading the VVAW's poetry alongside their direct action protests also allows me to see how the two types of aesthetic practice inform each other. First, close-reading the poetry helps me to make a similar formal analysis of the direct action protests, which are regarded in historical accounts of the antiwar movement as the most memorable of the groups' activities but have by and large not been treated

to a formal analysis as aesthetic objects that have the capacity to affect their audiences. Literary analysis of the poetry acts as a sort of rubric or key with which to read some of the aesthetic aspects of the protests. Then, likewise, attention to the protests as performances impacts my reading of certain aspects of the poetry because they become recognizable as dramatizations of the Vietnam War as a social problem, designed to elicit personal and national guilt.

The body of this chapter consists of close readings of the VVAW's three large direct action protests—Operation RAW, the Winter Soldier Investigation, and Dewey Canyon III—as well as a selection of antiwar poetry published by 1st Casualty Press in the 1972 collection *Winning Hearts and Minds*. The direct action protests took place in the two years prior to the publication of *Winning Hearts and Minds*, and both the literary and performative events happened while the US military was actively engaged in combat in Vietnam. How might the affective resonances of VVAW direct action protests have made their way into and been transformed by the poetry written and published by the group? Including the direct action protests as primary objects of study opens up the genre of antiwar literature so that what we might consider antiwar literature has less to do with whether an aesthetic object is “literary” and more with the affective response the object seems to want to provoke in the service of opposing war.²¹ In other words, in examining an instance where a collective used artistic forms of both writing and performance to dramatize a social problem, the critical acts of reading the performances as literary texts *and* highlighting the performative elements of the poetry expand the notion of what might be considered antiwar

²¹ In choosing to read direct action protests as literary objects, I am thinking about the historical moves away from previous iterations of narrating and describing wars as mentioned by theorist Fredric Jameson in his seminal essay, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Jameson calls the Vietnam war the “first terrible postmodernist war” when discussing Michael Herr’s reportage-memoir *Dispatches* (1977). “War cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie,” he writes; there has been a “breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms” and the “breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience”: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 44.

literature. The theatrical and the literary explode the boundaries between direct action protest as political activism and poetry anthology as aesthetic object. Of course, it is still important to think about the work of genre as it is traditionally understood, and reading the direct action protests and poems comparatively as well as complementarily encourages these considerations.

The VVAW centers affective power and antiwar argument in its members' lived experience and identities as combat veterans and in testimony (performative and poetic) that produces a Vietnamese figure for the US audience to stand up for, or perhaps merely pity. In exploring the role of subject position—soldier, civilian, refugee—in antiwar aesthetic production, I attend lastly to the manner in which the position of subject is nevertheless denied to Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans in VVAW cultural production and much of that of the US antiwar movement.²²

Direct Action Protest Aesthetics

VVAW originally endeavored to work within the political system by lobbying for an end to the war, but the group was disheartened by their inability to get antiwar Senator Eugene McCarthy selected as the 1968 Democratic presidential candidate. Around the turn of the decade, VVAW shifted tactics, and from 1970-71 engaged in three major instances of dramatic protests and community action for which they are most remembered today.²³ Literary scholar and activist Marianne Hirsch describes the intended result of antiwar demonstrations on onlookers, who,

²² In some cases, this erasure of the Vietnamese subject was not for lack of trying on the part of the VVAW, such as when US visas were denied at the last moment for a small group of Vietnamese people who had intended to provide testimony in the Winter Soldier Investigation.

²³ Ryan J. Kirkby, "Dramatic Protests, Creative Communities: VVAW and the Expressive Politics of the Sixties Counterculture," *Peace & Change: A Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 40, no. 1 (01, 2015) 38. See also Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 31. The protests are similarly described as "memorable" in 21st century media retrospectives on the Vietnam-era antiwar movement, e.g.: Bill Zimmerman, "The Four Stages of the Antiwar Movement," *The New York Times* (24 Oct. 2007) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/opinion/vietnam-antiwar-movement.html>. 21st century antiwar veterans' groups took inspiration from VVAW, waging their own protest performances including Winter Soldier Investigations: one organized by the Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW, now operating under the name About

going about their lives, are provoked to stop and to try, for a moment, to ‘imagine the real’ of lives lived in war, in poverty and need, somewhere across the world, and to think about the effects of those conditions on people here, whose lives are diminished, economically, psychologically, and spiritually, as their governments wage war and pursue policies of immiseration in their, in our, names. And through that act of imagination, to think about how to intervene.²⁴

By reading VVAW direct action protests as aesthetic performances, I aim to pinpoint the formal elements of the protests designed to provoke antiwar action affectively via a nebulous sensation of distress and, more particularly, feelings of shock (Operation RAW), guilt (WSI), and shame (Operation Dewey Canyon III).

The formal elements I will analyze in these three performance protests can be productively read as engaging Bertolt Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung*²⁵ and Antonin Artaud’s belief in a cruel theater, both of whom Davis, in his theorization of guerrilla theater, advocated for taking theatrical inspiration from.²⁶ Brecht and Artaud, both working in 1930s Europe, shared a distaste for the then-prevailing norm of theater as naturalistic, which Konstantin Stanislavski had put forth as a method that involved setting the scene, staging the actors’ blocking, and getting actors to reach into their personal memories to feel what their characters were supposed to be feeling so that the resulting production would seem as realistic as possible to the audience. In theater of this sort, the audience is intended to be passively absorbing the play, and Brecht recognized the vulnerability of such a project to fascist manipulation. Instead, both Brecht and Artaud thought that the audience

Face: Veterans Against the War) in March of 2008 and another by Veterans for Peace in March 2021: “Winter Soldier,” Iraq Veterans Against the War (n.d.) <http://www.ivaw.org/wintersoldier>; Veteransforpeace.org. IVAW has also performed guerrilla street theater actions similar to Operation RAW, which art historian Dora Apel writes about as “terror raids”: Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012) 69-72.

²⁴ Marianne Hirsch, “‘What We Need Right Now Is to Imagine the Real’: Grace Paley Writing against War,” *PMLA* 124.5 (Oct. 2009) 1769.

²⁵ “*Verfremdung* estranges an incident or character simply by taking from the incident or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious in order to produce wonder and curiosity”: Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn; trans. Jack Davis, Romy Fursland, Steve Giles, Victoria Hill, Kristopher Imbrigotta, Marc Silberman and John Willett (1964: London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) 143.

²⁶ Dan Georgakas credits Brecht and Artaud as influential on the US political theater scene of the 1960s writ large in his *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 614-16.

should be unsettled from its passive role.²⁷ Artaud argued for a “theatre of cruelty” as a means of confronting audiences with hard truths, as painful as they may be to face.²⁸ Meanwhile, Brecht developed plays guided by his concept of *Verfremdung*, translated as defamiliarization, estrangement, or alienation. More so than literary defamiliarization (which gives us critical distance from our lives), Brecht’s plays allowed the audience to recognize the play as a performance, which shattered any sense of the play as a contained narrative and implicated the audience in the process of theater on the whole, making for interesting critical and reflective effects.²⁹ Brecht’s plays alienated audiences from the story while also drawing them in via address so as not to totally shut them out. The alienation effect results from the dissonance of having a mimetic experience of the feeling that the characters are performing at the same time that the other elements of the play (setting, music, context) signal the performance’s. I argue that in running choreographed search-and-destroy missions in the middle of Main Street USA (as the VVAW does with Operation RAW) and even in the clumsiness of much of the poetry in *WHAM*, the aesthetic practice of VVAW seeks to unsettle their audience as Brecht and Artaud did, rather than communicate their antiwar message in a form designed to feel familiar or comfortable (the descriptive reportage of *Hiroshima* might be said to take more of the latter approach).

²⁷ There is here a connection to R.G. Davis’s “interest in using theatrical expression as a means of stirring up social complacency if not actually provoking social transformation”: Claudio Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998) 130.

²⁸ Critic and director Peter Brook characterizes this sort of confrontational theater as a “theater of the immediate”: Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (1968: New York: Scribner, 1995).

²⁹ The “interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theater as ‘epic,’ constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience,” writes Walter Benjamin in “The Author as Producer,” continuing on to say that Brecht’s Epic Theatre “is concerned less with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring way, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives”: Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin; trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008) 90, 91.

When I read VVAW direct action protests as aesthetic performances, I am not suggesting that these actions arose from the art world, although there was a substantial movement of antiwar art-workers operating contemporaneously with the VVAW. Rather, I think about the aesthetic and activist nature of VVAW protests in conjunction with contemporaneous social movements, experimental theater practices, performance studies theory,³⁰ all of which were burgeoning at the time VVAW was most active, as well as alongside a predominate attitude about aesthetics and politics in the art world, which art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson describes as “artists’ commitment to political change and their belief that art matters—that it *works*.”³¹ My readings of VVAW direct action protest treat the participants as operating in the context of a roughly contemporary surge of artist-activist guerrilla theater performances and a more general turn to the political in the art world.

³⁰ One such experimental theater group, the Diggers, “took theater into the streets. In the process they attempted to remove all boundaries between art and life, between spectator and performer, and between public and private”: Michael William Doyle, *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2001). In this way, the Diggers made VVAW street protest performances such as Operation RAW possible.

A founding scholar of performance studies as an academic discipline, Richard Schechner, argued in an echo of the Diggers’ formulation that performance events “blur or breach the boundaries separating art from life and genres from each other”: Richard Schechner, “What is Performance Studies Anyway?” *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 357-362, 361.

³¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009) 3. In a similar vein, performance studies scholar Diana Taylor elucidates the long history of a belief in the functionality of performance by practitioners and critics alike: the “idea that performance distills a ‘truer’ truth than life itself runs from Aristotle through Shakespeare and Calderon de la Barca, through Artaud and Grotowski and into the present”: Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Charleston, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 4.

Operation RAW



Figure 1. Photographs show VVAW members and volunteers from a Philadelphia theater group, who performed the roles of Vietnamese civilians, engaged in Operation RAW: Howard Petrick, "Operation R.A.W.: Viet Vet March Stirs Thought," *GI Press Service* 2, no. 9 (21 Sept. 1970) 3. *Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of Alternative Presses*.

Operation RAW demonstrated the *guerrilla theater* tactics that would become the "prototype for future VVAW protests."³² For VVAW, guerrilla theater, a term coined by SFMT member Peter Berg³³ and particularly apt for VVAW antiwar direct action performances due to its connotation with guerrilla warfare,³⁴ involved participants wearing combat gear and engaging in simulated warfare in public spaces amidst a civilian audience that had not (yet) been informed of

³² Hunt 53.

³³ San Francisco Mime Troupe founder, R.G. Davis, credited Berg with coining the term in his 1966 *Tulane Drama Review* article.

Elsewhere, responding to criticism that the SFMT was unpatriotic for putting on a national tour of their antiwar play, *L'Amante Militaire*, Davis is quoted as saying, "we cannot agree that it is disloyal to 'tell it like it is.' The Vietnam war is obscene": Fifth Estate Collective, "Guerrilla Theatre to Hit Detroit: San Francisco Mime Troupe in benefit for *Fifth Estate* October 28," *Fifth Estate* 38 (September 15-30, 1967) n.p. <https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/38-september-15-30-1967/guerrilla-theatre-to-hit-detroit/>.

³⁴ Guerrilla warfare is a revolutionary form of fighting, having to do with opposing an established government power structure. It was first theorized explicitly by Mao Tse-Tung and then famously by Che Guevera and others. "Guerrilla leaders spend a great deal more time in organization, instruction, agitation, and propaganda work than they do fighting, for their most important job is to win over the people. 'We must patiently explain,' says Mao Tse-tung. 'Explain,' 'persuade,' 'discuss,' 'convince,'—these words recur with monotonous regularity in many of the early Chinese essays on guerrilla war": Samuel B. Griffith, "Introduction," *Mao Tse-Tung On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (San Francisco: Hauraki Publishing, 2015) n.p.

Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese army, the NLF, carried out guerrilla warfare against the ARV (South Vietnamese military forces aided by the US).

what they were witnessing.³⁵ In the first issue of their newsletter, VVAW published “Guidelines for VVAW Marches and Guerrilla Theaters,” with the stated purpose of “assur[ing] that the marches that have become a frequent part of VVAW activities on a national and local level are *kept in the context of ‘Bringing the War Home’*. [sic] They should be educational as well as social gatherings for the membership.”³⁶ Guerrilla theater performances, per the guidelines,

should be conducted as often as possible but only when appropriate. The purpose of the theatres is to convey to people in a serious manner what we are talking about when we speak of interrogation, search and destroy, etc. It should be done where the largest amount of people can see it. There is no use in doing it for ourselves. The persons performing the theatre should be in front of the line of march and, if possible, rehearsed beforehand. People performing the theater should be rotated so everyone gets a chance at it. However use a few ex-grunts in all guerrilla theater. Designate at least five people to stay back and talk and leaflet the townspeople. Inform them of what they just witnessed.³⁷

R.G. Davis advocated guerrilla theater as an aesthetic form for combatting³⁸ the general state of alienation he identified as pervading the “climate” of the US in the mid-1960s.³⁹ In Davis’s view, this widespread alienation was enabling the war in Vietnam to accelerate while “no one feels any

³⁵ Visual culture scholar Rebecca Schneider analyzes the intersection of artistic performance and war reenactment in her 2011 work *Performing Remains*, noting that the “experience of reenactment (whether in replayed art or in replayed war) is an intense, embodied inquiry into temporal repetition, temporal recurrence”: Rebecca Schneider *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) 1-2. While my focus in this chapter is on VVAW guerrilla theater performances as influenced by experimental theatre practices, political artist collectives, and direct action protest, I think it is important to keep in my the tradition of war reenactment VVAW was inevitably engaging with by emphasizing their identification with the US military.

³⁶ VVAW, “Guidelines for VVAW Marches and Guerrilla Theaters,” *1st Casualty* 1, no. 1 (August 1971) 11. <http://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=828>. Emphasis added.

“Bring the War Home” was the slogan of violent antiwar guerrilla group, the Weather Underground.

³⁷ VVAW, “Guidelines for VVAW Marches and Guerrilla Theaters.” Hunt notes that VVAW repeated performances of each of the three major direct action protests covered in this chapter, and while he views this as a result of the group “running out of ideas” (123), I am interested in thinking about their repeated performances as instead what Taylor calls “acts of transfer.”

³⁸ Indeed, Davis quotes Che Guevera’s description of the guerrilla fighter as one who has the “intention of destroying an unjust order and therefore an intention, more or less hidden, to replace the old with something new”: R.G. Davis, “Guerrilla Theater,” *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 4 (1966): 130-136, 130.

³⁹ Another artists’ collective that contemporaneously adopted so-called “guerrilla” tactics in its political aesthetic practice was the Guerrilla Art Action Group, an offshoot of AWC, put on performance “actions,” including one titled *A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art* (aka *Blood Bath*). Art historian Matthew Israel calls the Guerrilla Art Action Group’s performances “groundbreaking” for their combination of “street actions, performance art, damning research, and powerful images of direct evidence into an entirely new form of artistic activism”: Matthew Israel, *Kill for Peace: American Artists Against the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013) 9.

guilt, not even the poor fool dropping the bombs.”⁴⁰ VVAW seems to have contemporaneously developed or else taken heed of Davis’s idea that guerrilla theater could inspire war guilt. VVAW also shares Davis’s preference for agitational art—the goal of which is to inspire *action* rather than knowledge or awareness alone—and his theory of the connection between art and emotion. Together, they make the case for revolutionary emotion. For Davis, the “ideal work of art would envision a believable version of communal life, demonstrate that individualism in all its aspects including capitalism stands in the way, point out the first step to take to destroy the obstacle and get people to take it...If the artist has to choose between *creating the desire* and outlining the means he must choose the first, as the thing that art is best at.”⁴¹ For Davis, art is particularly suited for bringing feelings into being, and these feelings can then trigger actionable change. I take VVAW’s adoption of guerrilla theater tactics specifically and their turn to aesthetic practices of performance and poetry more generally as following this same way of thinking about the power of political art.

In Operation RAW (an acronym standing for “Rapid American Withdrawal”), guerrilla theater amounted to about 150 veterans simulating a four-day search-and-destroy mission from New Jersey to Pennsylvania over Labor Day weekend in 1970, “tracing the same route once travelled by the U.S. Revolutionary Army”⁴² in a manner “designed to dramatize the war.”⁴³ In

⁴⁰ Davis, “Guerrilla Theater,” 133, 130.

⁴¹ “Revolutionary art will create a possibility for action...one should not confuse dialectical exposure with revolutionary action”: R.G. Davis, “Comedy and Revolution,” The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Guerrilla Theater Essays: I* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Mime Troupe, Inc., 1970) n.p.

⁴² Kirkby 40. Schneider writes of protest performances that play with time like the VVAW does here, “according to dominant art historical and performance studies logics, live performance takes place *only* now, or only in ‘immediacy,’ and otherwise disappears. But...artists currently engaging reenactment complicate the singularity of ‘now’ and approach performance by mixing and matching time, playing across temporal registers through explicit and literal re-play. The queering of time troubles our heritage of Enlightenment (and capitalist ‘development’) investments in straightforward linearity as the *only* way to mark time, reminds us of a durational ‘now’ for political action, and points to a politic in veering, revolving, turning around, and reappearing” (182).

⁴³ “Operation R.A.W.: Viet Vet March Stirs Thought,” *GI Press Service* 2, no. 9 (21 Sept. 1970) 3. Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of Alternative Presses.

choosing this route, VVAW showed that they saw themselves “as the inheritors of a legacy of radical resistance in the U.S. dating back to the American Revolution.”⁴⁴ Participants handed out leaflets to civilians along the route. These contained statements explaining what the guerrilla protest signified:

If you had been Vietnamese—we might have burned your house...shot you...raped your wife and daughter...turned you over to the government for torture...If it doesn't bother you that American soldiers do these things every day to the Vietnamese simply because they are 'Gooks,' then picture YOURSELF as one of the silent VICTIMS.⁴⁵

The leaflet, in no uncertain terms, orient its audience with the “silent” Vietnamese “victims” of the US military, in fear of rather than alongside the agent-victim veterans, and demands a mimetic response from the unwitting US civilian “audience” of the protest. Evan Haney, a Native American combat veteran who participated in the WSI characterized the Vietnam War “as a white man’s war, a continuation of the movement West that started with Columbus, continued with Custer, and was now to Vietnam.”⁴⁶ Haney’s linkage of the US war in Vietnam to colonization and genocide in North America and the VVAW performance of Operation RAW as a continuation of radical American resistance might seem to produce two distinct alternate histories, but the explanatory leaflet quoted above shows that VVAW as a collective believed that their political power was rooted in forcefully avowing their role in the ongoing history of US military genocide.

The guerrilla performance as a whole does something more complicated than creating the aesthetic conditions for a mimetic response of terror, of feeling-Vietnamese.⁴⁷ By thinking with Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* and the tenets of Artaud’s theater of cruelty, we might consider in a new way the affective dissonance produced by Operation RAW as a protest performance.

⁴⁴ Hunt 4.

⁴⁵ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 455, original emphasis.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Gil Merciez and Bob Moore, “Winter Soldier testimony continues,” *The South End* (2 Feb. 1971) 1.

⁴⁷ My interpretation of Operation RAW aligns with Taylor’s argument that a scenario, her capacious term enveloping, among other things, texts *and* performance events, is “not necessarily, or even primarily, mimetic” and rather “usually works through reactivation rather than duplication” (32).

VVAW's executive secretary, Al Hubbard, said of the performance's design: "They'll be dressed in ordinary clothes, but they will symbolize the Vietnamese peasant. We plan to demonstrate how, when troops move into a town, they sometimes snatch people out of a crowd and search them to see if, for example, they're carrying proper ID cards, or because they're suspected of harboring Viet Cong."⁴⁸ VVAW's mobilization of the spectacle of soldiers marching down the street and throwing people onto the ground would have been truly frightening or at least jarring to the unsuspecting witnesses on the street. And yet, they would not be allowed (by the familiar main street setting, the theater student participants' "ordinary clothes"/non-Vietnamese appearances, etc.) to have a completely mimetic experience. That is, they would always be aware that they were *not* in Vietnam, that this must be some kind of dramatization. The resulting dissonance of being confronted with choreographed yet realistic violence might then prompt witnesses to become alienated from performance enough to reflect, even before reading the provided leaflets, upon what the VVAW was trying to communicate by putting on this performance.

VVAW's leaflets demanded that recipients imagine—with a particular emphasis on the visual connotations of the word—themselves as victims. Operation RAW's performative practice of simulated search-and-destroy missions on American soil imitated the types of violence that were being carried out in earnest in Vietnam, forcing spectators who watched the march into the position of Vietnamese civilian-victims of the US military. Whereas in performances like the WSI, VVAW members would weave together their experiences as agents *and* victims of the destruction of war, Operation RAW did not orient the veterans as victims and in fact pushed their "agent" role squarely into the morally reprehensible territory of the perpetrator. VVAW therefore dramatized their

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hunt 47.

subject position as combat veterans in order to expose the villainy of US military actors at all levels of the chain of command.

Public response to Operation RAW varied. Some viewers, including a small counterdemonstration of members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), reacted to the violence of the dramatized search-and-destroy techniques by blaming the marchers for losing the war.⁴⁹ Others supported Operation RAW, joining in VVAW's closing chant of "Peace now!" and cheering when the soldiers obeyed the final order to break their toy guns.⁵⁰ Operation RAW was the least publicized of the three major VVAW events, but it firmly established the new, direct action method of VVAW. This particular performance was created for the purpose of shocking American civilians into an understanding of the terror the US military was perpetuating in the Vietnam war, with the goal of building antiwar sentiment that could bring the war to an end.

⁴⁹ Richard R. Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 109.

⁵⁰ Moser, 109.

Winter Soldier Investigation

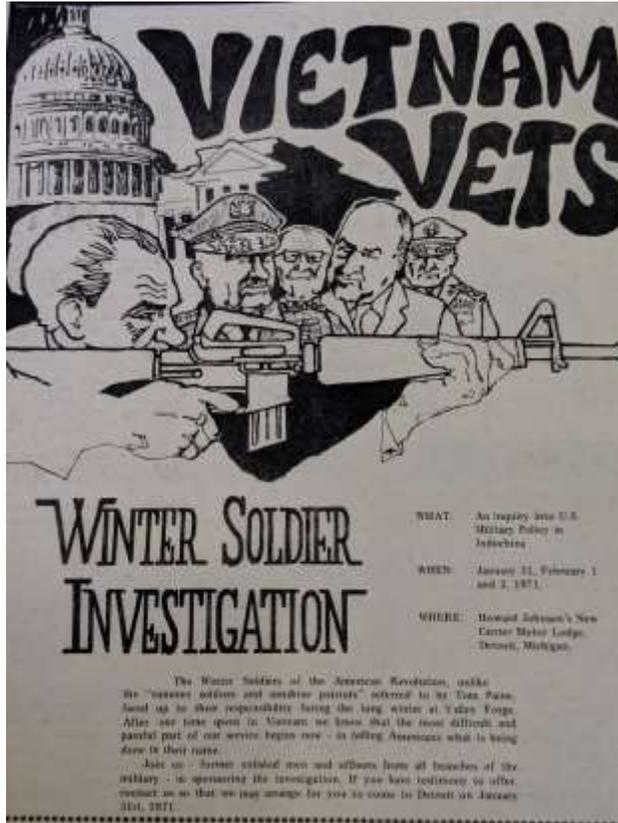


Figure 2. Advertisement soliciting veteran testimonies for the Winter Soldier Investigation taken out by VVAW in The South End, the student newspaper of Wayne State University in Detroit, on January 13, 1971.

VVAW's next major protest event, the Winter Soldier Investigation, was conceived after news of the March 16, 1968 Mỹ Lai massacre broke to the American public twenty months later in late November and early December 1969.⁵¹ WSI lasted three days, from January 31st to February 2, 1971. Set up as a war crimes tribunal consisting of consecutive panels of live veteran testimony followed by open "interrogation" of the panelists from members of the press and the general

⁵¹ US public knowledge of the event came primarily from "Nation: The My Lai Massacre," *Time* (28 November 1969) and "The Massacre at Mỹ Lai," *Life*, 67.23 (5 December 1969). Ron Haeberle, the Army combat photographer who submitted the first photos from Mỹ Lai to his hometown newspaper *The Plain Dealer*, later said of his decision: "I wanted to tell my story because there is a greater truth which must be told" and characterized Mỹ Lai as the "logical outgrowth of overall U.S. policy in Vietnam": Ron Haeberle, "We're All Guilty," *Waging Peace in Vietnam* 76, 78.

audience,⁵² the event was designed to encourage or facilitate individual and collective working-through of trauma while remaining primarily concerned with political impact.⁵³ Lieutenant William Crandall, who made the opening statement at the event, later wrote that VVAW's "naïve belief...was that the testimony of 125 American combat veterans on the criminal nature of the Vietnam War would simply end it."⁵⁴ Crandall's admission of the naivety of the belief that WSI could "simply" or directly end the war shows that he, if not the VVAW as a group, understood that the event would not literally cause an immediate and permanent ceasefire. But couched in Crandall's statement is an insight about the ways in which the VVAW imagined WSI functioning politically as antiwar action. The WSI as an antiwar protest performance assumed that its audience would be particularly impacted by a combination of appeals to collective testimony, the American legal system, and the lived experience of Vietnam combat veterans.

With the WSI, VVAW was protesting the lack of criminal accountability for war crimes meted out by the US military to the servicemembers responsible for the Mỹ Lai massacre in particular, and in the Vietnam War in general. Testimony by WSI participants alleged that internationally-recognized war crimes, such as those prosecuted after World War II by the international community in the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, were standard operating procedure

⁵² Chris Lahey, "Vietnam vets reveal war atrocities," *The South End* (1 Feb. 1971) 1. Attendance on the first day was reported as 700.

⁵³ Per Schneider, the "sense that the past is a future direction in which one can travel" is "one of the basic logics of psychoanalytic trauma" (22). Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) extends Freud's theory of trauma as a recurrent return to an absent presence. Caruth anchors her conception of trauma to the story of Tancred in the 16th century epic romance *Jerusalem Delivered* by Tasso, wherein Tancred unwittingly kills his love Clorinda, disguised as an enemy knight, and then slashes a tree, from which Clorinda's blood and voice stream out. We might think about the organization of the WSI around performative testimonials in connection with the way in which Clorinda's voice from beyond the dead, for Caruth, reads "as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8).

⁵⁴ Gerald Nicosia, *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 86.

for American soldiers.⁵⁵ With the WSI, the collective argument made by VVAW can be summed up as: *war is* (constituted by, consists of, amounts to) *war crimes*.

VVAW wanted to focus on “Middle America” by holding the WSI in Detroit. The city was chosen in part in anticipation of including testimony of refugees residing across the Canadian border in Windsor, Ontario, but an inability to acquire travel visas dashed that plan.⁵⁶ In addition, VVAW President Jan Barry described VVAW’s thought process behind staging the WSI in Detroit as, “Everything’s been directed at Congress for years, and what have those fuddy-duddies ever done? If we take it out to middle America and we shake up middle America, *they’ll* shake up Congress.”⁵⁷ The student newspaper of Wayne State University in Detroit published front-page coverage of the WSI: first, announcing the event a few weeks before it was to take place, then reporting on all three days of the performance, and finally featuring a two-part retrospective a week later about the effects of the event and the reactions it provoked. The first article, announcing the WSI, echoed Barry’s characterization of Detroit as being chosen because of its “middle-America” feel and added the significance of the “working class” character of the city. One participant is quoted saying, “We are college students, members of various professions, but we are primarily the sons of the construction workers. We have come home to speak to our parents.”⁵⁸ The WSI had multiple, and perhaps competing, intended audiences, including college students—the same article reports plans never carried out by the VVAW to put on “similar hearings throughout the country” on other college campuses—and middle-aged middle-Americans like those directly called on by the mother of a US prisoner of war. The mother, referred to as such in the condensed transcript of

⁵⁵ Writer Chris Lombardi’s fiftieth-anniversary retrospective on WSI similarly characterizes the major thrust of this performance protest: Chris Lombardi, “50 Years Ago, Winter Soldier Exposed the Vietnam War as One Long War Crime,” *Waging Nonviolence* (3 Feb 2021) <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2021/02/fifty-years-ago-winter-soldier-exposed-vietnam-war-crime/>.

⁵⁶ Hunt 64.

⁵⁷ Wells, *The War Within*, 462, original emphasis.

⁵⁸ Chris Lahey, “Viet vets to try U.S.” *The South End* (13 Jan 1971) 1.

the WSI published by the VVAW the following year, is quoted as saying, “I want to appeal to the middle-aged, middle-class America. We have to wake up and realize what’s happening to us.”⁵⁹

The WSI took the basic format of a “people’s tribunal,” an established grassroots political event—the modifier “people” demonstrating its difference from a judicial trial conducted by a state-sanctioned or international court of law. Writing in the legal journal for the American Bar Association in 1954, journalist Dorothy Thompson cited the Roman trials of Socrates and Jesus as early instances of people’s tribunals. Thompson ultimately argued that this method of public criminal judgments equaled the “antithesis of justice,” American communists, in her view, having taken up people’s tribunal tactics to turn federal courtrooms into “brawling arenas.”⁶⁰ For those who experienced the US judicial system as itself antithetical to any sense of justice, however, people’s tribunals functioned as a form of protest against and indictment of the failings of the system.⁶¹ For example, the “People’s Tribunal” in Detroit in 1967 was organized by a coalition of local Black militant leaders called the Citywide Citizens’ Action Committee in response to the release, on the grounds of lack of evidence, of one of the three police officers arrested for the murders of three men at the Algiers Motel that sparked rebellions/riots that summer.⁶² A leaflet advertising the event read, “Watch accurate justice administered by citizens of the community. Witness the unbiased, legal action of skilled black attorneys. Review and watch the evidence for

⁵⁹ Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 135.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Thompson, “The People’s Tribunal: The Antithesis of Justice,” *American Bar Association Journal* 40.4 (April 1954): 289-292, 291.

⁶¹ Over the last fifty years, peoples’ tribunals have proliferated globally, especially with the advent of the Permanent People’s Tribunal, which has had over forty sessions around the world since 1979. For a brief overview, see Gabriela Cuadrado-Quesada and Gabrielle Simm, “Peoples’ Tribunals: A Progressive Mechanism to Achieve Justice,” *Human Rights Defender* 23.1 (April 2014): 21-23.

⁶² Dan Aldrige, main organizer of the CCAC, said that the decision to hold the tribunal was made “so that the people could evaluate the evidence for themselves. The Black community needs to see that the type of justice we receive in Recorder’s Courts is the same kind that is meted out in Mississippi. That as long as you are south of Windsor, you may as well be in Mississippi. We wanted to show Black people that if this is the law, they had better be proud of their lawlessness because we must not respect a law which does not respect us. Our lawlessness may be the means for our survival”: quoted in John Hersey, *The Algiers Motel Incident* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) 348.

yourself.”⁶³ Reporter Frank H. Joyce covered the “People’s Tribunal,” for which he served as a juror, for the underground Detroit newspaper *Fifth Estate*, concluding that “it is likely that the tribunal technique has been established as a vehicle which will be used again.”⁶⁴ True to Joyce’s prediction, just over three years later VVAW held their own tribunal in Detroit.

The WSI was organized a few years after the first people-led war crimes tribunal (PWCT),⁶⁵ known as the Russell Tribunal, an anti-Vietnam War tribunal held in Denmark and Sweden in November and December 1967. The first PWCT was convened and chaired by philosophers Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, respectively, and findings of the tribunal were not published until 1971. While the Russell Tribunal was in part materially supported by North Vietnamese leadership and so was maligned as a “kangaroo court” by “Western politicians, supporters, and especially the media,”⁶⁶ many of the attributes of the tribunal and its outcomes would have been desirable for VVAW to repeat in its own planned mock war crimes tribunal.⁶⁷ Importantly, both the Russell Tribunal and the WSI were at their basis dramatic performances rather than speech acts; the organizers were well aware that they lacked sovereign power and thus that their findings would not compel those found guilty to serve criminal sentences. Indeed, the

⁶³ Hersey, *The Algiers Motel Incident* 349.

⁶⁴ Frank H. Joyce, “People’s Tribunal Condemns Cops: Defendants found guilty of Murder in the 1st degree,” *Fifth Estate* 38 (September 15-30, 1967) n.p. <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/38-september-15-30-1967/peoples-tribunal-condemns-cops/>.

⁶⁵ “Although bearing no officially recognised legal authority and lacking in juridical force, citizen-led tribunals have often resulted in high-profile (for the most part Western) leaders being publicly execrated as international criminals, fuelling popular outrage and activism”: Mark Boyle and Audrey Kobayashi, “In the Face of Epistemic Injustices?: On the Meaning of People-Led War Crimes Tribunals,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33 (2015) 697–713, 701, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Boyle and Kobayashi 705.

⁶⁷ Namely, the Russell Tribunal “lent credibility and authority to voices which otherwise might have been discounted. It was heavily scripted and performed and the skill of that performance, including the persuasive rhetoric of tribunal organisers (especially Sartre), the dramatic backdrop of the European theatre, and the gravitas of those called to act as citizen jurors or serve as witnesses, all made it less easy to ignore. Moreover, the Russell Tribunal collected and presented voluminous pages of testimony documenting atrocities occurring on the ground, in the deltas, on the dikes, and in the fields of 1960s Vietnam. It generated a corpus of new hermeneutic resources which anticolonial movements (not least in Vietnam) and subsequent PWCTs have found useful in pressing home cases against colonial and neocolonial violence”: Boyle and Kobayashi 709.

routine, individual aspects of (inter)national justice systems were so beside the point to the goals of VVAW that the organizers of WSI focused solely on testimony and interrogation, refraining altogether from performing judgements and sentencing in their event. What was important for VVAW to communicate through the form of the people's tribunal was the simultaneous *availability* of firsthand evidence of atrocities and *absence* of official reckoning or admission via the systems put in place by the state to address such events.

I take the live performance of collective testimony in the WSI, and the subsequent collection and curation of testimony in documentary and print forms, to be the VVAW's method of establishing a collective affective response to firsthand accounts of combat in Vietnam for the purpose of contesting and correcting the record of the dominant narrative and, in doing so, prompting a broad antiwar response.⁶⁸ The dramatic renderings of the testimonies served to create additional witnesses to the atrocities being committed by US military personnel, conducting an affective transfer from the testifying veterans to audience members. What was to be transferred were not only the facts of the atrocities but also the feelings that accompanied bearing such knowledge. In promotional material for the WSI, Crandall stated that "testimony will...call American people to *witness* the truth."⁶⁹ I wonder whether, in formatting the WSI as a war crimes tribunal that focused exclusively on testimonials, the VVAW's aim was to invite transference of guilt over violent desires that were partially responsible (along with the environment of military

⁶⁸ I am brought to such an understanding by thinking with historian Dominick LaCapra's judgement that the memory on display in victim testimonials "is important for an attempt to acknowledge and relate to the past in a manner that helps to make possible a legitimate democratic polity in the present and the future.": Dominick LaCapra *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) 91. WSI testimony can be seen to contain within it both factual information and the felt sense of the experience, just as LaCapra notes that video interviews with Holocaust survivors "provide[] something other than purely documentary knowledge," some ascertainable affect beyond factual data, communicated for example through facial expressions and tone of voice (86-87).

⁶⁹ Lahey, "Viet vets to try U.S." Emphasis mine.

hierarchy and embarrassment that demanded an attitude of impervious masculinity, which was also testified to) for the ubiquity of the war crimes they were testifying to.⁷⁰

The form of the event had the effect of producing a rhythm that allowed viewers to recognize patterns among testimonies and even anticipate common atrocities, all of which served to demonstrate the ubiquitous, unexceptional nature of war crimes—in direct contradiction to the government narrative about Mỹ Lai being an extraordinary result of a single bad actor. The WSI testimonies were grouped into panels, with most panels organized by military division so that at times, soldiers could corroborate each other’s testimony because they had been deployed together. Individual testimonies followed a consistent pattern, with a moderator first allowing the panel members to introduce themselves and the subjects of their testimonies, and then further elaboration of each soldier’s testimony driven by the moderator’s questions, and finally questions from the press. Per Crandall, a goal of the WSI was that the “fact that we are dealing with POLICY, not individual aberrations, can be readily understood.”⁷¹ On the fiftieth anniversary of the Mỹ Lai massacre, former war correspondent Franz-Stefan Gady wrote of the ubiquity of such events and the way in which the dominant narrative is “sanitized” by military leaders and reporters via omission of writing about “mangled corpses, raped women, and murdered children” for coverage of “tactics, strategies, logistics” and scientific euphemisms for killing. Gady’s retrospective takes up the VVAW argument that war crimes are a feature of war, as opposed to a bug: “There is nothing exceptional about the orgy of violence unleashed on the unarmed villagers on that fateful day. The massacre and torture of civilians, throughout history, has always been the unfortunate

⁷⁰ VVAW performances produced new witness-participants to the atrocities they described in a manner similar to what Schneider asserts about the witnessing of Civil War reenactments being its own kind of participation in the event that was being performed: “I did not, myself, reenact except—insofar as witnessing any event is to participate to some degree—to *have been there*” (9, original emphasis).

⁷¹ Lahey, “Viet vets to try U.S.”

consequence of the use of military force and there has virtually been no war in recorded human history where, based on the definitions in international humanitarian law, war crimes have not occurred.”⁷² In direct response to the sanitization Gady recalls from US coverage of the massacre and the war on the whole, the VVAW designed the WSI to center graphic descriptions of victims of US war crimes in participant testimonies.⁷³

One such piece of testimony, given by a soldier named Eckert from the 1st Marine Division, demonstrates the content and tone that was typical of the WSI:

I was up in Quang Tri visiting a friend of mine who was on security, which is like a rat patrol. They go out in the little jeeps and patrol the perimeter. We were out about five o'clock in the morning, just about coming in, when they spotted this old woman about--she looked about fifty but she was probably about twenty-five--and she was running across some trees and everyone in the jeep--no one was supposed to be out there, of course, it was not a free fire zone but from the hours from dusk to dawn there's not supposed to be anybody out there, and if there is, you're supposed to stop them, check them out, and eliminate them if you have to. So these guys decided that they would kind of play a little game and they let her run about fifty yards and they'd fire in front of her so she'd have to turn around, and then they'd let her run another direction and then they'd cut her off. This went on about a half hour until the time the sun started to come up. So then they decided it best to eliminate her as soon as possible, so they just ripped her off right there, and then the guy, the corporal that was in charge, he decided that they'd better check her out for an ID card just to be safe about it and they went over and, of course, she didn't have an ID card; she didn't have anything. Her only crime was being out probably tending to her buffalo before the time she should have been. These guys just took it upon themselves to waste her.⁷⁴

The testimony describes the torture and murder of a Vietnamese civilian by American soldiers. The soldiers terrorized the woman as a “game” and then “eliminated” her before verifying her combatant status via ID card. Eckert, the soldier who gave this testimony as a WSI participant, narrates the story of the woman’s death in a flat, matter-of-fact tone, using the word “so” multiple

⁷² Franz-Stefan Gady, “The My Lai Massacre and How to Write About War,” *The Diplomat* (March 17, 2018) n.p.

⁷³ In its original conception, which was stymied by visa denials, the WSI was to feature testimony from North and South Vietnamese refugees on the third and final day of the event in order to “give vets an opportunity ‘to know the Vietnamese as human beings, not as enemies, and not as targets’”: Lahey, “Viet vets to try U.S.” (Crandall is quoted).

⁷⁴ “1st Marine Division, Part II,” *Sixties Project*, last modified January 28, 1999,

http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_04_1Marine.html.

times to indicate the logical progression of the events. The repetition of “supposed to” in Eckert’s testimony gestures to the killings being consistent with US military policy, as does the mention of the leader of the group, the corporal, playing a key role in marrying the frivolous sadism of the cat-and-mouse “game” the group played before killing the Vietnamese woman to the proper procedural steps involved in carrying out a sanctioned enemy “elimination.”

Literary scholar Marianne Eide notes of the testimonial form in her study of the aesthetics of violence, “testimonial anticipates reception, gathering its force by the shadow pain it can inflict in the service of full understanding, cementing community with the shock of brutality.”⁷⁵ In the above example, Eckert constructs his testimony for a general audience, defining “security” at the outset of his story and contextualizing what the soldier-participants were and were not supposed to do. He ends with the harsh description of the woman’s murder via the slang term “waste,” which seems to accord with Eide’s “shock of brutality.” Eide makes this judgment about testimonials in the service of her larger argument establishing a Kantian aesthetic category of “terrible beauty,” the “vertiginous experience” of which “prompts ethical reflection.”⁷⁶ In setting up the case for such a category, Eide turns to journalist Philip Gourevitch’s insight that the impulse to consume stories of violence is not about learning right and wrong: we already know genocide is wrong, but “ignoring them [the stories] makes me even more uncomfortable [than looking] about existence and my place in it.”⁷⁷ This rings true in considerations of antiwar literature in general and WSI testimony in particular: while on the one hand, VVAW members are interested in bringing a wider audience firsthand information about US military conduct that has been censored in national media coverage, on the other hand, their audiences most likely already understood at some level that US

⁷⁵ Marianne Eide, (*Terrible Beauty: The Violent Aesthetic and Twentieth Century Literature*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2019) xii.

⁷⁶ Eide xv.

⁷⁷ Gourevitch quoted in Eide 4.

military action at Mỹ Lai and elsewhere was wrong and inconsistent with touted American values of human rights. Attendees of VVAW events, especially, were most likely already predisposed to antiwar sentiment. The point of communicating the information *as a dramatic performance* that ties together a collective description of the war as a continuous chain of murder, mutilation, rape, and destruction carried out by (primarily) young men who might well look like your son or classmate or neighbor and who admit to some level of enjoyment of the violent acts they detail, even as they describe the pressure they were under to commit them, is to attempt to shock the audience out of apathetic acceptance and into bigger, louder antiwar action fueled by the guilt of personal and national complicity. National because the cumulative nature of the WSI performance proves the US military endorsement of these acts (they are the American standard and so, as an American, you are implicated in them) and personal because now that you have seen and heard the testimony, you are responsible for either ignoring it or responding to it.

One testifying veteran, Joe Gavalling, “testified of witnessing six or seven men from his outfit raping a young girl in front of her family and half the village. He said he could remember more than 15 such incidents.” Another veteran, Russel Kogut, “said similar rapes were committed by friends in his outfit. ‘These guys were basically nice guys...and I couldn’t understand what was happening to make them do this.’”⁷⁸ This quote shows how the individual testimonies employed a rhetorical technique like Caroline Levine’s enormity effect, discussed in Chapter 1 as a technique at work in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*. Gavalling and Kogut together detail a specific incident and then multiply that event to show the audience how simultaneously brutal and commonplace these acts were; this is also true of the way that veteran testimonies overlapped and interacted throughout the WSI to paint a picture of the acts as part of the everyday of the war. Kogut’s quote points, too, to

⁷⁸ Pam Gordon, “All is Fair?” *The South End* (3 Feb. 1971) 1.

something about the war (something atmospheric, perhaps, in that it is the result of a combination of elements) that made soldiers act in this way with such regularity. Rather than a narrative of soldiers as individual bad actors, Kogut posits that the war itself evoked brutality in and from the soldiers. The testimony of yet another veteran, Don Donner, that “after a person is put under immense strain, he snaps,” is one reading of *how* the war makes people commit atrocities.⁷⁹



Figure 3. The front-page photograph in the February 3, 1971 issue of The South End shows the face of a WSI audience member, encircled by and overlaid with the VVAW logo. The stylization of the photograph highlights the focus in the event on the audience's emotional and conceptual response to the performance, as well as the fact that this was a performance designed to transfer information and affect from the panelists to an audience: Pam Gordon, "All is Fair?" The South End (3 Feb. 1971) 1.

The WSI, as a performance, seems to operate on the belief that the sharing of an understanding of complicity in, if not direct cause of, the suffering described in every exposure-via-testimony would be what enabled an antiwar response to the performance. Meaning, audience members had to feel that they, as Americans, were responsible for the war crimes in order to stand up in opposition to the war. The WSI testimony was directed by veterans at US civilians to produce not solidarity between veterans and civilians but rather an awareness of their connectedness and

⁷⁹ Gordon, "All is Fair?"

the specific form of this relation (that is, what the former was doing in the latter's name).⁸⁰ If the WSI testimony sought to transfer an affective response from the testifying veterans to the civilian audience members, was the audience to empathize with the speakers—the soldiers who had committed or stood by the graphic acts of violence they described—or the subjects of the testimonials—the Vietnamese people whom they had, as a matter of routine, brutally harmed? Instead of thinking about the response VVAW was interested in eliciting from their audience in terms of empathy and/or mimesis, I find it more productive to conceive of them as intending a transfer of *some* strong negative affect (not necessarily identical to that being expressed by the testifying veterans). WSI is formally designed to address a civilian audience that, while likely already predisposed to antiwar sentiment, is not already aware of the details the collective testimony will expose. The aesthetic effect of the performance on this imagined audience would move them to feeling implicated in and distressed by the described brutality and upset by the contradiction between military brutalization-as-standard-operating-procedure and US ideals, such as freedom and peaceful coexistence fundamental to US understanding of itself as a democracy and its stated mission in Vietnam as a protector of vulnerable peoples threatened by communism.

I posit that the Winter Soldier Investigation can be read as an aesthetic practice of performance wherein the dramatization of the firsthand accounts of atrocities as part of a mock tribunal was designed to connect the testifying soldiers and the audience of fellow soldiers and broader public so that a feeling of shared guilt would be produced concomitant with the knowledge of the system-driven ubiquity of such atrocities. Together, the collective guilt and this knowledge,

⁸⁰ In this way, the WSI seems to share some similarities with certain Civil Rights movement tactics, such as staging demonstrations with the intent of publicizing police violence against protestors, which, when seen on the news would provoke horror and shame from white people who do not want to identify with the police officers. African American studies scholar Leigh Raiford asserts that both abolitionists and Civil Rights activists used photography of anti-black violence (of slavery and police brutality, respectively) to galvanize powerful white sympathizers: Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011) 14, 86.

which contradicted and overpowered the hegemonic US narrative of the extraordinary nature of any atrocities that made it past de facto censorship practices, were intended to provoke an affective response that would spur antiwar action. Whether or not participants—a designation that extends to performing veterans, audience members, and consumers of WSI content via text and film records—indeed gained some automatic knowledge of how to act, as Vladimir Lenin contends will happen in his writings on political organizing through the use of “exposures,” is more difficult to prove and outside the scope of this study.⁸¹ Still, VVAW member Joe Urgo called the WSI a “turning point,” asserting that “anybody who sat there in the room and listened to the testimony was blown away by it.”⁸² Michael Oliver, a member of VVAW leadership, told local press: “As far as the movement is concerned, I think it was highly successful. A lot of people are getting together.”⁸³ If only by solidifying the cause of VVAW for those who witnessed the WSI, the event had an immediate actionable impact on the antiwar movement.

Operation Canyon Dewey III

Operation Canyon Dewey III has been canonized as the most powerful display of the antiwar movement in public memory of the Vietnam era, and it finally garnered the nationwide

⁸¹ For Lenin, in what I view to be a similar manner to the way in which VVAW demanded that Americans inhabit the subject position of Vietnamese civilians in the performance of Operation RAW, the exposures of workers’ suffering through written accounts of daily mistreatment caused those reading them to experience an emotional connection to the suffering: “Upon reading about the mistreatment of others, readers will not only understand but will *feel* (Lenin’s emphasis) that they are being oppressed by the same ‘dark forces’ oppressing the persons they read about. Perhaps more surprisingly, Lenin asserts that the feeling will bring with it an irresistible desire to act as well as a knowledge of *how* to act, what to do.”: Jonathan Flatley, “How a Revolutionary Counter Mood is Made,” *New Literary History* 43, no.3 (2012) 509.

⁸² Wells, *The War Within*, 473.

⁸³ Oliver went on to state that the failure of the WSI was in “making the American people know what’s happening in Vietnam” because there was a “press blackout” and the WSI was not covered by major newspapers on either coast: Bob Moore, “These soldiers won’t even fade away.” *The South End* (9 Feb. 1971) 1. Ultimately, the WSI was somewhat politically successful in that several Congressman spoke out about investigating war crimes and VVAW took from the early organizational failures of the event valuable lessons about publicizing and planning events for maximum public attention, but the hearings themselves received relatively little media attention. Nicosia, *Home to War*, 72-73.

attention VVAW had been working towards since its shift toward direct political action.⁸⁴ VVAW continued to assert the argument from Operation RAW and the WSI: that war crimes were the rule rather than the exception of the war in Vietnam. In Dewey Canyon III, VVAW combined formal elements from the previous two performances with an emphasis on the dramatization of the rejection of any pride, valor, or service in the participants' fulfillments of their tours of duty (because these duties amounted to the perpetration and coverup of violent atrocities). The central performance action of the three-day event was a mass rejection of war medals, which I close-read in more detail at the end of this section. With this performance, VVAW dramatized both sides of their hyphenated self-styling as "agent-victims": the agency of the medal-throwing an admission of and rejoinder to their active participation in a war of war crimes, the display of debility by the vanguard of wounded participants and the vulnerability of much of the testimony making plain to the public what they had lost to the war.

Taking place at the end of April 1971, less than three weeks after Lieutenant William Calley was sentenced (as the only military serviceperson convicted in the Mỹ Lai massacre), the event featured over a thousand veterans camping on the Mall in Washington D.C. Though their camping was deemed illegal by the Supreme Court, no arrests were made on the first night due to considerations of the optics of punishing veterans. As Police Lieutenant William Kinsey put it, "We are not going in there at 1 in the morning and pick [sic] up some wounded veteran and throw

⁸⁴ "VVAW conceived Dewey Canyon III as a total demonstration that left no stone unturned in an effort to draw public attention to the war's atrocities": Franny Nudelman, "What Comes Before Woke? On the History of Sleep as a Form of Protest," *Literary Hub* (6 Nov. 2019) <https://lithub.com/what-comes-before-woke-on-the-history-of-sleep-as-a-form-of-protest/>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2020. "No prior demonstrations had exerted such an emotional impact on the American public," writes Hunt of Canyon Dewey III (116). The event made *Teen Vogue*'s recent list of anti-Vietnam War protests about which "everyone should know": Lucy Diavolo, "6 Legendary Vietnam-Era Anti-War Movement Protests Everyone Should Know" *Teen Vogue* (May 3, 2019) <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/legendary-vietnam-era-anti-war-movement-protests>.

[sic] him into the street.”⁸⁵ The special treatment law enforcement bestowed on VVAW members as veterans both enabled participants to conduct forms of protest not available to other groups and to create a precedent allowing other antiwar protestors to camp on the lawn since VVAW had not been removed.

When some VVAW members *were* arrested later in the week on the steps of the Supreme Court, the optics of the situation had the antiwar impact Lieutenant Kinsey seems to have wanted to avoid. Coupled with the alleged attitude of the arresting officers, the optics converted a passing veteran, unaffiliated with the VVAW or the broader antiwar movement. Warren E. Connelly wrote a letter to the editors of the *Washington Post*, describing his thoughts after a police officer saw his Army jacket and assumed he was one of the “punks” at the antiwar demonstration:

The guys on the steps of the court were right and I *should* have been over there with the rest of the punks... While I watched those crippled GIs being arrested, I didn't know how I felt about the war. Five minutes later, I really did know. If a guy who was permanently maimed for nothing is a punk, I'm glad to share the honor.⁸⁶

Connelly describes a moment of conversion in his feelings about the war caused by viewing other veterans suffering arrest for opposing the war. He develops an antiwar sentiment and a sense of solidarity with the arrested protestors, demonstrating the power of the visual to create new feelings, dispositions, and understandings.

The spectacle of watching people being arrested is a key connection between VVAW and broader antiwar movement and Civil Rights movement tactics engaged in the service of dramatizing a social problem. Another antiwar group making use of similar visual appeals to authority was the Catsonville Nine, a group of Catholic protestors, two of whom were priests in

⁸⁵ "Vets Disobey Court Order, Sleep on Mall." *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, Apr 22, 1971. See Nudelman for an account of the legal case between the US government and the VVAW and the political ramifications of VVAW's decision to risk arrest by sleeping on the Mall in defiance of the Supreme Court's decision.

⁸⁶ Warren E. Connelly, "Letters to the Editor: A Week of Protest: Reactions to the Veterans, War and the Demonstrations." *The Washington Post, Times Herald (27 Apr. 1971)* A18.

their collars, who staged a burning of draft cards with homemade napalm, all caught on video by a TV cameraman who had been invited to the action. Documentary filmmaker Joe Tropea said of the act's effect," [It] *shocked* people. People couldn't believe that they were seeing pictures of priests being arrested for committing this type of action. Other people were completely *inspired* by what they did."⁸⁷ Here, the recognizable garb of the priests took on a similar role to that of VVAW members' uniforms, making use of deep-seated attachments to religious and nationalist symbols, respectively, in order to evoke the moral authority of the protestors. Additionally, the Catsonville Nine, like the VVAW, made collective participation and a simultaneous narrativization/theorization of their performative actions key aspects of their protest. To enact collective participation, each of the Nine contributed to the preparation of the napalm and lit at least one match to burn the draft cards. In addition to praying, "as the papers burned, a few of the protestors articulated their beliefs [and] commented on the nature of the day's actions,"⁸⁸ which I take to be a similar impulse toward rationalization or explanation as was evident in the leaflet disseminated as part of Operation RAW, the testimony of some WSI panelists, and, as I discuss later in this section, the brief speeches of participants in the Dewey Canyon III medal-throwing.

In the case of Warren E. Connelly, the military uniform was an activational element of the VVAW's protest, not in the sense of commanding him to respect the authority of their perspective as antiwar veterans but in that Connelly became interpellated as part of the protest, first by the police officer, and then by himself. The police officer assumed that Connelly was participating in the protest because he, like VVAW members, was wearing military clothing, and the military uniform likewise enabled Connelly to recognize the individuals being arrested as Vietnam

⁸⁷ Quoted in Erin McCoy, "Civil Disobedience Under God: Breaking Binaries of Antiwar Protest and Faith," *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 33.2 (Summer 2016) 71, emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ Jim Stacy, "Iterations of Conscience in Performance: The Catsonville Nine, Their Protest, Their Trial, and Their Docudramas," *Theatre Symposium* 14 (2006) 90.

veterans. VVAW employed a strong branding tactic with the choice to dress in clothing recognizably associated with military service beginning with Operation RAW and continuing through Dewey Canyon III. This branding strategy for protest movements was not invented by VVAW, but in this specific case, it functioned as an outward representation of the respect for servicemembers commonly demanded of the American public (which Police Lieutenant Kinsey and his fellow officers were responding to) and the unifying experience of military service (which Connelly spoke to in his letter to the editor). The decision to protest in uniform can be read as a formal element of VVAW's aesthetic practice, intended to simultaneously evoke and dramatize a collective feeling among VVAW members and military service members.⁸⁹ The uniforms were likely a factor in creating the enormous surge of antiwar feeling in the most sensorily impactful moments of Dewey Canyon III, the returning of medals.

In the culmination of the carefully planned protest event at the end of a week of political lobbying (notably, by John Kerry) and smaller displays of guerrilla theater, hundreds of veterans marched in a single-file line to throw their military medals over the fence of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., some speaking into a microphone as they did so.⁹⁰ The visual effect of uniformed veterans, headed up by a contingent who were visibly disabled/amputees,⁹¹ rejecting

⁸⁹ While I read VVAW's direct action performances, including Dewey Canyon III, as drawing on and resembling the aesthetic practices of other protest movements and practitioners of drama, VVAW members, including President Jan Barry, were quick to distinguish themselves from other protestors, with Barry saying, "We came down here and ignored most Movement traditions... We were neither trashers, passive marchers, nor the usual nonviolent civil disobedience types. We followed our own instincts and did things our own way... Nobody has ever come down here and run around through Congress in old grubby clothing, waving toy guns, the way we did, nor have people dared [to] say what we've said": Kirkby 50.

⁹⁰ Kirkby 49. Veteran Ron Ferrizzi recalled in the documentary film series *The Vietnam War* (2017) that throwing the medals back was harder than going to Vietnam, but that in giving them back to try to end the war, he was making them worth something: "'A Disrespectful Loyalty' (May 1970-March 1973)," *The Vietnam War*, dir. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, September 26, 2017 (Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service, 2017), <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/watch/#episodes>. In the same segment of the documentary, Marine John Musgrave said that he saw VVAW as children of Nixon's silent majority and understood his participation with the group as equal in honor to his service in the Marines.

⁹¹ These disabled veterans "display[ed] their wounds as a form of protest against the violence of war": Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham and London: Duke

the symbols of their U.S. military service—specifically, symbols of the approval by the U.S. military of their behavior as soldiers in Vietnam—combined with the auditory testimony of those who chose to speak as they threw their medals over the fence to produce a performance that was formally designed to elicit a powerful collective feeling. The setting of the returning of the medals within the enormous antiwar march, with the live and TV audiences, allowed what would have been a transformative event for the individual VVAW participants and the group as a collectivity to have the potential to be a transformative experience for bystanders/witnesses. Unlike the purposeful turn away from the speech act of judgment in the mock tribunal of WSI, Dewey Canyon III took the form of a (collectivity of) speech act(s). Here, through the spectacle of the performative speech acts, VVAW powerfully leveraged a combination of the aesthetic and political.

Dewey Canyon III was the pinnacle, in terms of both formal complexity and publicity, of all of VVAW's direct action protests.⁹² However, the success of this demonstration was a culmination of lessons VVAW had learned from the shortcomings of Operation RAW and the Winter Soldier Investigation and its contemporaries'—including Civil Rights and Women's Movement activists—successful courting of media attention. For those watching Dewey Canyon III on television, who may not have already been sympathetic to the antiwar movement as those who attended WSI in person likely were, a cultural conditioning to respect military service may have been particularly effective at moving viewers to take seriously what they were seeing on the Capitol lawn and what they were hearing veteran participants say about why they were throwing away their medals. An article in *The Washington Post* begrudgingly admitted VVAW's influence:

University Press, 2012) 22. However, Chong reminds us that missing from the protest was any representation of the majority of bodies injured in the war: the Vietnamese.

⁹² “VVAW finally found a national audience with Dewey Canyon III. For five days, newspapers ran dramatic headlines updating their readers on the historic happening...On television, footage of John Kerry's speech...received a five-minute spot on the national news, while the three leading networks kept viewers abreast of daily events”: Hunt 78.

[VVAW] professes to have around 12,000 members. That is an impressive enough membership, but, as a small fraction of the men who have served in Vietnam, hardly one that can claim, on the basis of numbers, to represent a preponderance of Vietnam veterans. Even so, we suspect there is some truth to Mr. Kerry's assertion that the views of his group on the war and on the particular toll it is taking on U.S. servicemen are shared by a considerably larger number of men than those for whom it is qualified, by membership alone, to speak.⁹³

The year before, Kerry was quoted by the *Los Angeles Times* as having a "feeling, nothing I can prove, just a feeling that a majority of Vietnam war veterans believe the war should be ended immediately."⁹⁴ With Dewey Canyon III, VVAW was able to dramatize that feeling Kerry described with the goal of spreading it beyond the veteran population. The recognition by the press of the collective feeling shared by VVAW members and other veterans and civilians not directly involved with their antiwar activism indicates that VVAW direct action protests aimed at changing Americans' attitudes about the war had succeeded to some extent.

Operation RAW, the Winter Soldier Investigation, and Dewey Canyon III all feature performative direct action protest that takes as its focal point the bodies, voices, and lived experiences of US combat veterans of the war in Vietnam. VVAW members used their status as veterans of the war they were protesting to challenge the narrative of honorable, patriotic service and sacrifice that the U.S. military depended on to keep public opinion of the war from completely deteriorating. VVAW contested this narrative in the simulated search-and-destroy missions of Operation RAW and the war tribunal testimonies of the Winter Soldier Investigation by dramatizing their role as "agent-victims" in a war constituted by the commission of atrocities that were piling up on the other side of the world as they performed their protests. The organization symbolically rejected the hegemonic US narrative of necessary and patriotic military service and sacrifice in Operation Canyon Dewey III by systematically returning honorary medals to the

⁹³ "The Particular Plight of Vietnam's Veterans," *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (20 April 1971) A18.

⁹⁴ "Vietnam Peace Not Imminent, Veteran Says," *Los Angeles Times* (17 Dec. 1971) p. 1. *ProQuest*. Accessed April 9, 2018.

capital—equating with trash the medals they had been bestowed with great pomp and circumstance and that carried within them the societal significance of U.S. military tradition. Through these performative direct action protests, soldiers sent the message that the US government was valorizing war crimes and that to accept their medals was to continue to be complicit. By rejecting them, VVAW rejected the war and charged witnesses to take seriously what the rejection of a war by those enlisted to wage it meant. While VVAW activism did not lead to an immediate end of the Vietnam war, the organization demonstrably impacted public opinion and public memory by spreading antiwar sentiment through performative protests meant to elicit emotions ranging from terror and guilt to outrage and disgust.

Winning Hearts and Minds: Protest Poetry

Winning Hearts and Minds, edited by VVAW members Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet, takes its title from an official slogan of the American pacification and relocation program in South Vietnam and is dedicated “to the children of Indochina.”⁹⁵ In their preface, the editors address the reader, claiming that the poets whose work is included in the volume “remind our country that the crime cannot be washed away,” and make known that despite being “desperate to believe they do not share in the complicity of the acts committed by their sons and their leaders,” Americans “were, and are, a part of the evil” (v). This framing of the poems as a cohesive statement at the outset of the book is indicative of VVAW’s antiwar agenda, which characterizes the war as a social (societal) problem that, as opposed to the US hegemonic narrative of the war as necessary to prevent the global spread of communism and liberating for the Vietnamese, is criminal and “evil” and for which all Americans bear culpability.

⁹⁵ *Winning Hearts and Minds*, Eds. Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet (New York: 1st Casualty Press, 1972). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

The form and content of the VVAW-backed literary anthologies were carefully curated to support a theory of the Vietnam war as representable by its US veterans.⁹⁶ Such a theory would in turn rationalize the VVAW's assertion of antiwar veterans as authority figures: if veterans believed that the war should be opposed and ended, and the war was best understood by veterans, then antiwar positions should be taken up. Theory meets practice in the concluding "Note to the Reader," which lists several uses for the book, including reading it aloud or distributing printed copies in public spaces, creating artwork inspired by the poems or poems' "emotions," or using poems as antiwar trial evidence (118-119). A review of the anthology published in *The Militant*, praised it as an "emotion-packed volume of poetry" with "poems deeply moving on an individual, human level" and "potential for significant political impact."⁹⁷ *WHAM* also served to publicize VVAW and the group's antiwar work more generally.

The poems in *WHAM* frequently concern themselves with the embodied and affective impact of war as a means of resisting, through pathos, the sterile facticity of news coverage of the war, and to a lesser extent, the lack of focus on Vietnamese casualties. The editors write that "urgency...moves these poets to tell others that the war has not ended simply because there are fewer U.S. casualties" (v). The anthology also continues to aesthetically represent Vietnam veterans as agent-victims of the war. Like Dewey Canyon III, some of the poems in *WHAM* dramatize the dual victimization of the Vietnamese and the US soldiers themselves. The editors'

⁹⁶ In her essay on 1st Casualty Press for the *Journal of American Studies*, American literature doctoral student Caroline Slocock noted that the press's editorial decisions "produced a coherent identity within the anthologies...[that] stressed the relevance of a creative expression of the soldier's individual experience in the war to a larger understanding of Vietnam," while their strategy for publicizing *WHAM* and its 1973 follow-up short story collection *Free Fire Zone* "provided a context in which [the anthologies] could be actively used to rally opinion against the war.": Caroline Slocock, "Winning Hearts and Minds: The 1st Casualty Press" (*Journal of American Studies* 16.1, Apr. 1982) 108.

⁹⁷ Lee Smith, "Antiwar Vets," *The Militant* 36, no. 19 (12 May 1972) 20. The Militant Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. In his retrospective article on *WHAM*, Gilbert characterizes it as "one of the most compelling, insightful, and moving accounts of the American war in Vietnam" (1).

urgency, caused by the fact of the continuation of the war at the time of the publication of the anthology, infuses the text with the desire to materially contribute to ending the war, a goal in which the readers share agency just as and because they are implicated in the perpetuation of the war thus far. In other words, part of the task of the poetry as laid out by the editors is to raise its audience's consciousness of their entanglement in and agency over U.S. military action in Vietnam. In their grassroots organizing, much like the Women's Liberation movement's use of consciousness raising as a method of building solidarity among movement members, the VVAW used "rap groups" (sessions overseen by psychologists wherein veterans talked about their wartime experiences) and other forms of therapeutic dialogue in a "combined emphasis on testimony and action."⁹⁸ With *Winning Hearts and Minds*, the VVAW made to transfer such in-person consciousness-raising experiences into the aesthetic experience of reading poetry; by the time an American civilian finished reading the volume, they had been charged to consider their own agent-victim status.

Several poems individually engage with the theme of being an "agent-victim." The speaker of Stan Patke's "And Then There Were None" appropriates the well-known opening of Psalm 23, "Yea as I walk through the valley of death / I shall fear no evil" in order to close his poem with the declaration: "For the valleys are gone / And only death awaits // And I am the evil" (101). The worldview of the veteran speaker this poem is nihilistic, doomed and blasphemous. The rewriting of the Biblical verse may induce shock in the reader, of the sort that in other poems in the collection comes from a well-placed enjambment. Here, though, each line is a logical and grammatical whole,

⁹⁸ Kirkby 55. See also Hunt 87. In fact, the antiwar aims of the VVAW are put directly into conversation with those of the Women's Liberation movement in a collectively-authored section of the first issue of VVAW newsletter *The 1st Casualty* titled "Veterans Liberation": "Rap sessions (consciousness raising) can help the Vets deal with their collective guilt, and possibly build a firm foundation for mutual respect" because "[t]he danger facing V.V.A.W., as a predominantly male organization, is that it might start to emulate the very thing it is fighting against: the arrogant chauvinism of the military, which encourages all the forms of male dominance that exist in society as a whole" ("Veterans Liberation." *The 1st Casualty*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Aug. 1971). <http://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=895>).

but the vision that is described is difficult to comprehend in two senses: the extent of the destruction is semi-incomprehensible (the “valleys are gone”) and the depth of malevolence insistently inscribed to the speaker, particularly in the final line, separated off into a standalone stanza, is tough to absorb, especially if the speaker is understood to represent (with the first-person “I”) and implicate all US soldiers, citizens, and so on (with the repetition of “evil” in the preface to the anthology).

In *WHAM* co-editor Larry Rottmann’s short, punchy “S.O.P.”, instructions for making a “stretcher” for Vietnamese casualties is given in the form of an ingredient list, as of a building project or recipe: “two helicopters / two long, strong ropes, / and one elastic gook” (53). The description of a sadistic war crime is here described directly, in a tone neither apologetic nor boastful, with the final line landing as a racist punchline. As with recipes in cookbooks, which the list form of the poem resembles, it is assumed that the speaker has “tested” the construction of the stretcher by committing the war crime described. The force of the poem comes by way of the unapologetic tone the speaker adopts when detailing the act of atrocity as tried and tested. As literary scholar Matthew Hill writes in “Talking the Real War: Jargon, Guilt, and Viet Nam Veteran Poetry,” the “pronounced lack of emotion displayed by Rottmann’s speaker in the face of this atrocity is meant to elicit outrage—and of course antiwar political sentiment—in the reader.”⁹⁹ “S.O.P.” dramatizes an attitude that VVAW argues is prevalent among and representative of US troops in Vietnam, describing the kind of atrocities perpetrated by US soldiers in the perspective/ tone of the unrepentant perpetrator. The poem is a set of instructions for a war crime, and the reader is being trained to carry it out. The reader must work through the experience of being addressed by a speaker who assumes that they might want to know how to commit this

⁹⁹ Matthew Hill, “Talking the Real War: Jargon, Guilt, and Viet Nam Veteran Poetry,” *The Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 2 (June 2008) 181.

brutalization, too. The key, though, is that outrage (and offense) the poem anticipates inciting in the reader is redirected from the speaker up through the chain of command to the American military leadership by way of the definition of the act as *standard* (S.O.P. in military jargon stands for “standard operating procedure”). Like the testifying veterans of the WSI, “S.O.P.” embodies the soldier’s perspective in order to demonstrate that the cruelty that drives US war crimes is a *structural* feature of military training rather than a rare and innate quality of a few “bad apples.” “S.O.P.” challenging readers to have and then reject a mimetic response, in a process that might be termed anti-empathy.

If the title of the poem immediately alerts its readers that such crimes are standard practice for US soldiers, its final line tells us that those soldiers consider such actions fun/ny.¹⁰⁰ The use of the slur as the final word in the poem dramatizes (in the sense that the poem speaks performatively from) the mindset a soldier must maintain in order to commit the atrocity the poem describes. WSI participants theorized the link between racism and language in a panel on “racism in the war and in the army.” A news report noted that “all the panelists agreed that the racism against orientals, against the Vietnamese in particular, was amazing. One panelist started to talk about something the ‘gooks’ did and then caught himself: ‘There, see, that’s what we mean,’ he said.”¹⁰¹ As this unrehearsed moment displays, veterans were indoctrinated into referring to Vietnamese people with racial slurs, and the imagery in “S.O.P.” metaphorically dehumanizes the Vietnamese victim of the poem, turning them into an object (the “stretcher” in its medical context, which contains

¹⁰⁰ The poem’s “black humour...implies the dehumanizing effect of the war on American soldiers” and works with the rest of the poems in the collection to expose the “absence of any positive meaning in the American soldier’s experience of war”: Slocock 109.

¹⁰¹ Merciez and Moore 1. Don Dzagulones, a US Army interrogator during the Vietnam War, made a similar observation in an interview with journalist John Conroy for his transnational study of torturers: “Dzagulones recognizes now that throughout his training, the Vietnamese were being dehumanized. ‘Even in the training at Fort Meade, they were referred to as dinks or gooks’”: John Conroy, *Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) 115.

within it the double-meaning that gives the poem its invidious punchline: thing-that-stretches). However, the focus of the poem on the mutilation of the Vietnamese body seems to argue that something more like sadism than desensitization is the objective instilled in military training (official or de facto).¹⁰² Those veterans who developed antiwar positions became aware of the life-and-death impact of the normalization of such sadistic jokes and racist language, which Rottmann demonstrates most pointedly in his use of “gook” to end his poem.

The close quarters of military terminology (“S.O.P.”) and a racist slur has the formal effect of both implicitly characterizing the US military as racist and strengthening the sense of collectivity among veterans who would recognize committing such an atrocity as unexceptional behavior. Hill notes that “jargon is by its nature an impersonal, group-centered language,” which can serve as both a “means of representing solidarity, and in many cases anonymity, within a group” and a mechanism for “resist[ing] the assignment of individual blame, instead helping to diffuse responsibility to the group.”¹⁰³ In “S.O.P.” and veteran testimony in the Winter Soldier Investigation, VVAW flips this logic by using service-based collectivity for antiwar aims. Whereas military documents might employ jargon to sterilize war reports and, along with passive construction, evade responsibility for violence and destruction, the VVAW means not to diminish or evade but to *spread* guilt for war crimes such as the one described in “S.O.P.” from the anonymous (and therefore unaccountable) soldier who committed it out to the American public *in toto*.

¹⁰² My reading privileging sadism over desensitization while still acknowledging that dehumanization is at play runs contrary to characterizations such as Belew's that the “widespread use of body counts as a marker of success in the Vietnam War encouraged soldiers to think of the enemy as numbers or vermin, not people” (29).

¹⁰³ Hill 176, 177. Later in the essay, Hill calls Vietnam veteran poetry “perhaps the most direct and intimate response to the ‘jargon stream’ of language on the war” (178).

Another poem by Rottmann, “Man of God,” takes a military chaplain who “Prays for the souls of the enemy / On Sunday mornings / And earns flight pay as a helicopter door gunner / during the rest of the week” as its subject (24). Along with Frank A. Cross Jr.’s “Fifty Gunner,” about a peace-supporting soldier, “Man of God” exposes the hypocrisy of any claim to morality amidst the violence of war and argues that everyone has blood on their hands. “The Fifty Gunner” describes the act of shooting by charting the recoil of the gun through the titular gunner’s hands, arms, and shoulders until it “Set bouncing / The peace medallion / Dangling on his chest” (24). The poem concludes with a stanza tracking the resulting bullets as they “Ripped flesh / From the running targets” (24). Rottmann and Cross’s poems seem to trouble the very idea of antiwar veterans. The two poems are placed together on a single page, an example of the ways in which the collections’ editors use extratextual means to build connecting themes among the poems.

The final poem of the collection, and the only one written by a civilian, similarly implicates everyone in the continuation of the war. Sue Halpern points the finger at herself with the title of her poem, “I am a Veteran of Vietnam,” and goes on to write of taking in the constant coverage of the war on TV as “1st hand” experience. Far from passive observers, US civilians are lumped in with combat veterans as war agents who “let it / go on” (113). The inclusion of Halpern’s poem in the collection, and its placement after—but not separate from—the poems penned by veterans, links the veterans and the US public in terms of experience and positionality as agent-victims. Slocock notes that the “soldier’s dilemma as ‘agent-victim’ was only a more extreme form of many Americans’ sense of conflict over the war fought in their name, and it provides a valuable point of reference between the soldier and the experience of the American civilian.”¹⁰⁴ Literary scholar Lorrie Goldensohn argues that the intensively televised nature of the American war in Vietnam

¹⁰⁴ Slocock 111.

led to a blurring of the military-civilian divide wherein “both confessional soldiers and morally passive civilians feel continuing responsibility for what happens.”¹⁰⁵ Vietnam veterans did not occupy the position of witness-participant in the same degree of isolation as had veterans of earlier, non-televised wars; as Halpern’s poem illustrates, American civilians witnessed the war on the nightly news and felt the weight of participation by tuning in.¹⁰⁶ In the poems of *WHAM*, importantly, “each articulation of guilt and atrocity...is also an accusation,” with the poems functioning not as mechanisms for psychological recovery from trauma—or, at least, not only or, I would argue, primarily as such—but as indictments of the war machine in which (every)one is a participatory cog. They are also, as the “Note to the Reader” makes plain, agitational works: calls to oppositional, antiwar action.

The publication history of *WHAM*, while not the focus of my interest in the anthology, does provide some important context for its status as an antiwar object. Turned down by dozens of commercial publishers, the editors of *WHAM* published the anthology independently. The publication process was a feat of collective labor, with other antiwar organizations including Clergy and Laity Concerned and a Quaker Press contributing typing and printing assistance, respectively. Once printed, copies were sold at a bulk discount to local and national organizations, who were encouraged to sell them and use the profits for further antiwar work; VVAW donated part of its profits to a South Vietnam hospital.¹⁰⁷ 1st Casualty ran two printings of 10,000 copies before McGraw-Hill sought a contract to print *WHAM*, bringing its total run to 45,000 copies.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 237. Still, Goldensohn notes that “so far, it is the soldier-poets, in their perspective as both criminal and perpetrator in what they felt to be the long crime scene of the war, who wound up with the most to say.”

¹⁰⁶ David Callaghan argues that the Vietnam War’s “extensive and immediate media coverage helped fuel antiwar opposition...over a span of time during the first ‘living room’ war”: David Callaghan, “Where Have All the Protestors Gone?: 1960s Radical Theatre and Contemporary Theatrical Responses to U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq,” *Theatre Symposium: A Journal of the Southeastern Theatre Conference* 14 (2006) 110.

¹⁰⁷ Slocock 114.

¹⁰⁸ Slocock 108.

These figures are meaningful to consider for what they can tell us about *WHAM* as a text committed to bringing about an end to American military presence in Vietnam. That 1st Casualty Press sold out of its first run of 10,000 copies, began distribution of a second mass printing, and then received commercial resources from McGraw-Hill tells the story of the “urgency” the editors describe contributors feeling as they composed and submitted their poems for inclusion in the anthology. Unlike poetry and other literary work that would be produced and published in the years and decades following the Vietnam war by its veterans, *WHAM* was created to be consumed *before* the end of the war, in order to hasten it along. Therefore, while it may be true that the poetry had a healing effect on some authors or readers, as Slocock argues,¹⁰⁹ their primary purpose was antiwar political activism. That is, if there was an interest in the working through of guilt over the course of the anthology, the aim—just like that of the WSI—was not to absolve the veteran speakers of guilt but rather to transfer it to the audience (one might even say, keeping with psychoanalytic terms, to *sublimate* said guilt into antiwar action).

Conclusion: Aesthetic Protest, Protest as Aesthetic Practice

The review of *Winning Hearts and Minds* in *The Militant* brought up VVAW’s actions before the April 24, 1971 antiwar demonstrations and described their impact as producing a “dramatic shock.” This characterization and the inclusion of a reference to VVAW direct action protests in the review of the poetry anthology show the group’s poetry and performative protests informing the others’ political, aesthetic, and affective impact. By bringing together the poetry and

¹⁰⁹ The “point of this literature lies in the sharing of the soldier’s sense of conflict and guilt with the reader as one way of coming to terms with it. Perhaps this was the reason why the members of the 1st Casualty were so sensitive to the initial rejection of their work by commercial publishers, and why the editors then worked so hard to ensure that the voices of these veterans would be heard,” writes Slocock (111). By contrast, Hill argues that the “articulation of sin results not in catharsis but in an unresolved melancholia” (182), a position I find more convincing, particularly in consideration of melancholia’s productive political potential as theorized by Jonathan Flatley in *Affective Mapping* (2008).

performance protests in this chapter, I have established that VVAW sought to convince fellow Americans to act in opposition to the Vietnam War by dramatizing it as a social problem, a problem for the US as a society and for how Americans understood themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Through their aesthetic practices of performance and poetry, VVAW presented a distressing, unsettling firsthand account of their active role in a war of war crimes. My characterization of VVAW aesthetic practice has a few broader implications for conceptualizing of the shifting priorities and strategies of US antiwar literature. For one, it helps show how antiwar literature, and political art more generally, must respond directly to its historical situation because, as we have seen, VVAW enabled and was enabled by the political energy of social movements of the 1960s. Additionally, the “agent-victim” subject position theorized and dramatized by VVAW is an example of a turn to situatedness, by which I mean an emphasis on acknowledging one’s position in relation to the US military-industrial complex (as a victim, beneficiary, taxpayer, target, etc., because at this point in history, no one is outside of it, even if they think they are not implicated) as a mode of orienting a US antiwar position.

VVAW performance actions sought to dramatize the guilt soldiers felt for the war crimes they had committed and witnessed and to performatively transfer that guilt to US leadership: by indicting them for their role in standardizing the war crimes and minimizing them to the US public, by creating new public witnesses who shared the feeling of guilt and responsibility for these war crimes, and by inviting their radicalized audience to take antiwar action directed at this leadership. In addition to the transference of guilt onto their imagined audience and government and military leadership, another affective objective of the WSI was to embarrass government officials by exposing atrocities and, with them, the lie of American exceptionalism to the US and global public. Just as testimony by VVAW and writing by Tim O’Brien, perhaps the most prominent Vietnam

veteran author, assert in terms of action and inaction on combat tours, embarrassment is a powerful motivator.¹¹⁰

As I have said, the VVAW's antiwar position rests upon the argument that their members speak as authorities on the war who have therefore appointed themselves representatives of the morals *all* Americans should hold regarding its waging. In both their collectively authored and published literary anthologies and direction action protests, the VVAW operates from the Lyotardian position that a consensus of experts is what produces scientific reality.¹¹¹ That is, the VVAW's use of *collective* forms of antiwar literature defines their argument; they are authoritative not only because they have experience (expertise) of the war but also because they are many. The VVAW was not alone in turning to collectivity to up the ante for aestheticized antiwar work. Matthew Israel pointed to "collective aesthetic endeavors" created by groups such as the Art Workers' Coalition as a major category of Vietnam-era antiwar artwork in his survey of the period. In Israel's view, such collective endeavors "relied on their size and collective facture—rather than the particular character of the individual contributions involved—to make their statement against the war."¹¹² Troubling the persuasiveness of such arguments based in collectivity is the concurrent blurring of facticity that characterized the military strategy, combat experience, and cultural response to the US war in Vietnam.¹¹³ Such confusion of fact and fiction, Jeffords argues, coupled with a split sense of identification—feeling as though one is both the subject and the audience of an aesthetic representation of the war—forecloses the possibility of critique on a system-wide or

¹¹⁰ "Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment": Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried," *The Things They Carried* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1990) 20.

¹¹¹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989) 25.

¹¹² Israel 4.

¹¹³ As feminist scholar Susan Jeffords wrote in her study of popular culture responses to the Vietnam War, "what was taken for a fact in the World has an entirely different meaning in the Nam.": Jeffords 31.

ideological level.¹¹⁴ If facts cannot be agreed upon or trusted, what good are experts? I understand VVAW to be pushing back on such a question not only in calling attention to their personal combat experiences by fashioning themselves the agent-victims of the war but also in the unsettling, confrontational style of their poetry and protest. If their audience is not amenable to the factual content of their testimonial aesthetics, then VVAW seems to trust that they will be moved by the way it *feels* to take in hours of firsthand accounts of sadistic violence at WSI or to read about a Vietnamese “stretcher” in “S.O.P.”

Film studies scholar Sylvia Shun Huey Chong also notes a second form of blurring—a confusion of the Vietnam war *with* its cultural representations: “Because of their mass distribution, these [national media] images were the Vietnam War for many Americans, supplementing and shaping the memories even of those who served in the war.”¹¹⁵ Chong notes that the combination of representation and event, or substitution of representation for event, allowed for the invention of “Vietnam syndrome,” a trope that shifted the dominant narrative of the war from active (something the US did) to passive (something that happen to us/US). VVAW representations of US soldiers’ combat experiences—and more specifically, their agency in those experiences, which they argued consisted of routine perpetration of atrocities—worked to resist the making-passive of US military involvement in order to bring about its end.

However, VVAW protests and poetry contributed to the sidelining of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American experience of the war by placing the US combat veteran at the center of their antiwar argument, and existing scholarly analyses of VVAW direct action protests and poetry,

¹¹⁴ Jeffords 21. Per Jeffords, the “pretense of occupying two positions simultaneously is one of the primary features of Vietnam representation” (19).

¹¹⁵ Chong 3.

by not challenging it, contribute to this sidelining.¹¹⁶ For instance, when Rottmann makes the rhetorical decision to include the slur “gook” in his poem “S.O.P.,” and Slocock theorizes that the poem demonstrates the “absolute dehumanization of the American soldier,” this accounts in no way for the absolute dehumanization of the Vietnamese victim in the poem *and* the potential for re-traumatization of readers who identify with the Vietnamese corpse rather than the speaking soldier. In this light, the poem and the criticism represent what Chong calls the oriental obscene, which “speaks not only to the trauma of the imagined oriental body, but also to that *oriental body as the index of trauma within the national body*.”¹¹⁷ Though *Winning Hearts and Minds* bears the dedication “to the children of Indochina,” the anthology is organized to describe the chronology and psychological-emotional journey of a “typical tour of combat duty in Southeast Asia” (v). A cynical reading would be that the dedication is mere lip service, but I find this discrepancy between intentions and results to be indicative of a shortcoming in the VVAW’s poetic and performative articulation of an entirely sincere antiwar argument. Where Operation RAW challenged onlookers to think of themselves as Vietnamese civilian-victims, VVAW’s best-known protest action, Operation Dewey Canyon III, completely erases the Vietnamese from the antiwar narrative.

The first veteran-authored poem in the collection, W.D. Ehrhart’s “Viet Nam – February 1967” is a prime example of both the VVAW’s instinct to connect affectively, even sympathetically, with the Vietnamese people they encountered while at war and their failure to sustain focus outside their own subject position (American, veteran). Ehrhart’s poem consists of four stanzas, each a complete sentence, describing the titular setting through visual, auditory, and

¹¹⁶ According to critical refugee studies scholar Yên Lê Espiritu, Vietnamese Americans protested the war separately because they felt that the antiwar movement centered American soldiers at the expense of Vietnamese civilians: Yên Lê Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (2006) 410-433.

¹¹⁷ Chong 21, emphasis mine.

olfactory lenses before concluding with the US soldiers as the object of the gaze. In the first stanza, the sky is “heavy” and “ominous,” and by the third stanza, military weapons “growl” and “whine,” the US invading the middle of the poem (5). Humans are absent from all but the final stanza, which describes Vietnamese people and ends with the line, “A ragged child stares at passing soldiers” (5). Are the Vietnamese people merely elements of setting in the poem, equated as they are to environmental elements and inanimate objects (weapons)? Or does the poem purposefully shift its gaze away from US soldiers for as long as possible to focus on the war as it impacts Vietnam?

Chong and others remind us that the overwhelming (but not absolute) white and masculine orientation evident in the poetry and performance activism of VVAW effects *who* is being addressed by their antiwar actions and *how* that audience is being asked to identify with the works. The crux of Jeffords’s study finds that the Vietnam war and cultural representations of it served as a proving ground for reconceptualizations of masculinity in US society writ large: the “crystallized formations of masculinity in warfare...enable gender relations in society to survive.”¹¹⁸ In this way, Vietnam veterans became “emblematic of the condition of all American men, not just those who went to war.”¹¹⁹ VVAW makes use of an expanded version of this logic not to put forth an argument about gender—at least not chiefly or explicitly—but to give weight and breadth to their antiwar argument. In other words, VVAW takes advantage of the patriarchal slippage that applies traits of combat veterans onto an entire gender in conjunction with the patriarchal ideology that positions white men as the neutral category of person. This accounts for the way in which their

¹¹⁸ Jeffords xv. Jeffords calls war the “most severe consequence of the mystification of gender” and power relations in patriarchy and advocates for further feminist study of warfare (181). In my view, such work would provide another set of stakes for or way of framing the urgency of antiwar progress.

¹¹⁹ Jeffords 135. Patridge argues that the antiwar potential of the WSI is a result of the direct action protests’ calling into question the “contemporary cultural construction of the ‘hard’ and ‘emotionless’ man as the model citizen, who could be marshaled to carry out these atrocities” (7). But Jeffords seems to suggest that remasculinization occludes antiwar arguments in texts and rather reinscribes a hegemonic narrative that holds up military participation in wartime as a patriotic duty (142-43).

aesthetic practices, poetic and performance-based, argue that *all* Americans ought to feel guilt and responsibility for atrocities committed by US soldiers in Vietnam. In this way, Sue Halpern's "I am a Vietnam Veteran" is both a poetic answer to this VVAW demand and a calling in of other civilians like her. However, VVAW aesthetic practices elide the unevenness of culpability for and contribution to the war effort except in distinguishing government officials as chiefly responsible.

Where writers covering the wars of the previous generation, including Hersey, worked within the logic of American exceptionalism and the genre of objective reportage to make their antiwar arguments, VVAW exposed American exceptionalism as a lie (in terms of the superiority of the US military, morally and tactically) and did so by turning to aesthetic forms that did not depend on their audience's belief in tenets of modern liberalism because social movements of the '60s and '70s had already begun to turn public opinion away from these. Aesthetic forms that dramatized this breakdown were best suited for their anti-Vietnam War argument. At the same time VVAW still believed very much in the effectiveness of political art. That is, they had not completely given up on the premise, shared by artists and activists of the era, that the public could be moved by an aesthetic experience to action against the commission of atrocities by their government. This is not the case for the subjects of the second half of this study, who aestheticize their disenchantment with such a political project (Chapter 3) or were never compelled by it in the first place (Chapter 4).

**CHAPTER THREE: ANTIWAR READING, EXCESS FEELING, AND THE
METABOLIZED CORPSE IN ROB HALPERN'S *COMMON PLACE***

Introduction: Visibility, Intimacy, and Relating to the War Dead

Rob Halpern's 2015 poetry collection, *Common Place*, "metabolize[s]" the U.S. Armed Forces autopsy report of Mohammad Ahmed Abdullah Saleh Al Hanashi, a Yemeni man who died while he was a Guantanamo Bay detainee.¹ As Halpern's choice of the verb "metabolize" indicates, the poems in *Common Place* are concerned with art as a means of embodiment: the "poem being but the gesture of a body" (35), as an early poem states. At the same time, the text takes a specific (dead) body as a thematic anchor, providing the name of the detainee as listed on the autopsy report as a kind of citation to the second poem in the collection. In doing so, the text disavows any potential distance between the reader, the poems' speaker, and the detainee that might have been perceived if the detainee were to have been rendered anonymous and therefore more comfortably fiction- or generalizable.

Halpern works through his own assumptions about intimacy as the poems vacillate between a) putting faith in the idea that if he can fantasize about being a sexual partner to the detainee, he can reanimate him ("as if my own sentences possessed some restorative force to bring the body back" [25]) and b) recognizing the impossibility of such a project ("though it's not like that at all, as if transcription could animate the dead" [31]). The speaker of *Common Place* submits himself to a fantasy that desire can be powerful enough to return lost objects, or at least the feelings attached to them (if I write well enough, precisely enough, about my desire, I can bring back the feeling of my lost love). I locate such desire in the obsessive level of revision the poems perform

¹ Rob Halpern, *Common Place* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015) 155. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

upon themselves as the collection progresses, for instance, in the eight separate but repeating articulations of dreams that make up the poem “Late Nite Emissions.” How do we create recuperative emotions from an actual once-living body? What is at risk in this project is the abstraction of the detainee into a symbol; to avoid losing sight of the historical fact of the detainee’s life and death, *Common Place* must continually treat the lost object simultaneously as a desire *and* a literal lost body.

Throughout *Common Place*, descriptions from the autopsy report are integrated into the poems without the use of quotation marks, so that the language of the autopsy becomes not only the object sparking self-reflection from the poems’ speaker but also *exceeds* its constraints as technical language and becomes poetry itself. The leak of the contents of the autopsy report into the poems is one of many formal and metaphorical instances through which excess is elevated as a key concept in *Common Place*. Questions I take up through an engagement with Halpern’s poems as antiwar literature include: What happens when the language of war is held up for examination in a work of art? How does *Common Place*—a poetic project that centers itself around a voiceless, powerless victim of the US military—engage with the hegemonic narrative of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (elided and characterized as the “war on terror”)? What can Halpern’s poetry tell us about how the categories of victim and perpetrator are presented in the hegemonic narrative of this first US war of the new century, how antiwar art resists this hegemonic treatment, and what has changed since VVAW members branded themselves “agent-victims”?

While Halpern’s poetic treatment of the detainee corpse is problematic and could even be characterized as predatory—the postscript to *Common Place*, anticipating this sort of claim,

acknowledges: “to sexualize *exploit* the body of a hunger-striking detainee crosses a line” (160)²— I take Halpern to be using poetry as a site from which to interrogate accepted modes of intimacy by aesthetically exceeding them in ways that pointedly push back against prevailing norms about acceptable ways to feel and act as an American in the “forever wars.” The poems ask of themselves, “But if the body’s more than what’s contained by skin, I mean, if there’s more to the flesh than what’s been ceded by code, how can we arouse this excess?” (94). By taking the meta-questions in *Common Place*, about form and function, art and life/embodiment, seriously and attending to the aesthetic feelings the poems solicit from their imagined reader in the context of the cultural norms/historical situation of the second decade of the “war on terror,” this chapter shows how Halpern’s work is indicative of a broader aesthetic response to the political disenchantment of the period. This is a significant shift from the belief in the political power of art that we saw in the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era. I argue that *Common Place* both represents such disenchantment with the revolutionary potential of political art and calls for a possible way out: denaturing the very categories of subjectivity that shore up the depravity of 21st century US capitalism/nationalism/militarism.

While *Common Place* presents a totalized, if formally fragmented, vision of political economy and the US military-industrial complex in the 21st century, Halpern’s response to the existence of the leaked Guantanamo Bay autopsy report that he takes as his poetic starting block is deeply personal. His poems work to process his individual relation to the corpse of the detainee by imagining other possible ways in which the two men could have been in relation. “Relation” in the poems entails all of the various meanings the word can imply: a “particular way in which one

² At other moments in the collection, Halpern’s speaker emphatically rejects the idea that he should be ashamed of what he is doing: “But I won’t learn to mourn by covering my naked self with shit while reciting my poems for you” (30), and a page later: “It makes no sense for my hard-on to shame me” (31).

thing or idea is connected or associated with another or others,” a link or connection “by circumstances [or] feelings” between disparate entities, social interactions and feelings (as in familial or kinship relations; i.e., being someone’s relative), the maintenance of political or economic contact (as in “diplomatic relations”), and sexual relations.³ That all of these definitions are at play in a single word in Halpern’s poems is but one example of why the word that springs to mind when I attempt to sum up *Common Place* is “conglomeration.” The second poem of the book, “Hoc Est Corpus,” translated from the Latin as “here is the body,” introduces (and names) the detainee and takes the form of straightforward transcription of the contents of the autopsy report—something of a conceptual art project, or, going on the title of the poem that follows it (“House-Scrub, or After Porn”), a porno. This gives way to commentary on the process of said transcription (written in the present tense to suggest live or real-time commentary) mixed with diversions into personal memories and erotic fantasies about the subject of the autopsy report (who is sometimes revived by/in the poems and sometimes remains dead on a US military prison gurney).

“I can’t stop wondering *what it would feel like to arouse relation at the place of its derealization*, inside his ‘gastric mucosa, arranged at the usual rugal folds and unremarkable,’” Halpern’s speaker tells us in “House Scrub, or After Porn” (39, emphasis added). Here, we can make a connection between *Common Place* and Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, another text concerned with “arous[ing] relation at the place of derealization,” albeit in a different way, or at least on a different level of scale and spectacle. Whereas Halpern locates derealization in a Guantanamo Bay autopsy report, Hersey seeks to make relatable the *hibakusha* experience of the atomic “flash.” In both cases, derealization is directly caused by the US military and compounded by their attempts to

³ "relation, n.," *OED Online* (March 2021), Oxford University Press.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161810?redirectedFrom=relation> (accessed March 05, 2021).

cover it up. I see both Halpern and Hersey's projects as operating in line with Jean Luc Nancy's theory of compassion, wherein one is always already in relation with (the) other(s), which undoes one's idea of oneself as a subject that can either relate to/with another or not (i.e., how empathy is generally conceptualized). For Halpern and Hersey, a new relation between Halpern's speaker and the detainee or Hersey's reader and the *hibakusha* does not need to be invented; the existing relation must be acknowledged—and aroused. Crucially, for the speaker of *Common Place*, the possibility of achieving this arousal is not assumed; it is an object of curiosity to him (“I can't stop wondering”), and one that he imagines engaging at the level of sensation, combining the (always social) intimacy of feelings as emotions and feelings as physical experiences.

Unlike Hersey's report on the details of nuclear destruction in *Hiroshima* or, for a more contemporary example, the now-infamous leaked photographs of American military prison guards abusing inmates at Abu Ghraib prison broadcast by CBS News in early 2004,⁴ *Common Place* did not function textually to break the news of the conditions of detention in military prisons and black sites around the globe. Instead, it is a purposefully aestheticized response to the leaked information and images that quickly entered the public imaginary of the “war on terror” when the extralegal practices of the US state at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere and their attempted coverups were exposed through both conventional and controversial methods.⁵ Whereas I have argued that *Hiroshima* contests US censorship and public acceptance of the atomic bombing in

⁴ See a contemporary write-up of the *60 Minutes II* broadcast on which the photos were first aired: Rebecca Leung, “Abuse at Abu Ghraib,” *CBS News* (5 May 2004) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-at-abu-ghraib/>.

⁵ Wikileaks, the publisher of Halpern's source material, belong to the latter category, along with famously exiled NSA contractor Edward Snowden; CBS News and other journalistic exposes were joined in the former category by investigative bodies such as the Senate Intelligence Committee, which produced a 2014 report on the CIA's use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” on individuals detained as “enemy combatants.” A summary of the report is publicly available in declassified form as: “Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, Foreword by Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Chairman Dianne Feinstein, Findings and Conclusions, Executive Summary.” *United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*. Dec. 9, 2014. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CRPT-1113srt288.pdf>.

large part *by appealing* to the American exceptionalist ideology of its readers, *Common Place* has abandoned any such notions that US readers can be swayed to an antiwar position by appealing to their sense of national (moral) superiority. Wikileaks and the Abu Ghraib exposé did not cause a sustained moral uproar in the US, and *Common Place* quickly establishes that neither will including snippets of the leaked autopsy report in the lines of some poems.

Common Place resists the function of an exposé even as it relies upon one for its source material, first documenting the contents of the leaked autopsy report via transcription only to then obscure the documentary text within a poetic imagining of (sexual) contact with the subject of the report. In this way, Halpern's text breaks from the literary tradition that privileges visibility and intimacy (and, at times, visibility as generative of intimacy) as political techniques for speaking truth to power. This tradition, to which Hersey's *Hiroshima* and the literary works of VVAW subscribed, assumes that making visible what the state has hidden and achieving greater intimacy with one's literary subjects are steps in the direction of ameliorating political problems. *Common Place* troubles both assumptions, Halpern seeking to oppose "dominant regimes of visibility."⁶ First, the text explodes such a unidirectional version of visibility: what is inside becomes outside, nothing is invisible, everything is rendered openly available regardless of ethical norms surrounding privacy. Then, Halpern interrogates the ways in which queer intimacy, which dominant strains of queer theory present as radically decentral and radically othering, has very clear racialized and gendered limits, lines that it will not cross. When queer theorist Leo Bersani asks in his landmark essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", the object of inquiry is *the* rectum (in

⁶ Halpern in an interview with Thom Donovan for the Poetry Foundation's blog series says that affect, as "raw matter" existing between the "pre-linguistic" and "properly social," stands against "dominant regimes of visibility by arousing the raw material of representation before it freezes or coagulates" and that "prosody—as a technology of organized stress—can participate in the work of loosening...affective material from its 'proper' ends": Rob Halpern, interview by Thom Donovan, "Rob Halpern: On Somatics," *Harriet, a Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, April 26, 2011. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/rob-halpern-on-somatics>.

general, universally), not *a* rectum. Halpern selects the textual record of the death of *a specific* body as the object with which to cross the line past what is comfortable to think about, even and perhaps especially in the context of queer theory.

In *Common Place*, US war violence erupts in the speaker and intrudes upon poetic meditations on the foregone conclusion that confrontational aesthetics could motivate an antiwar politics. We have seen in the previous chapters of this study that confronting reading publics with graphic and discomfiting details about US military violence and presenting as ubiquitous what the architects of the hegemonic pro-war narrative would rather downplay and deny is an established tactic in antiwar literature. How does the depiction of violence in *Common Place* alter the antiwar literary tactic employed by Hersey and VVAW? What does the affective hesitancy caused by this excess of violence help us to understand about how art can be antiwar in a historical moment characterized by suspicion of nuance and an insistence on what Jasbir K. Puar's terms homonationalism? To seek answers to these and earlier questions, the remainder of this chapter first situates my reading of *Common Place* in theoretical discussions of aesthetic feeling and structures of feeling from scholarship in affect theory and cultural studies. Then I identify the structure of feeling of the "war on terror" that I argue *Common Place* rejects and contests. I survey the affective impact of the form and content by analyzing key poetic techniques and themes via close reading before closing with an analysis of the text as challenging the parameters of antiwar literature.

The form of *Common Place* can be characterized by a mashup of lyric form—with its apostrophe and enjambment—and a crushingly dense prose structure that seems somehow formless despite all evidence of its meticulous organization. This blended formal structure is populated with content that returns obsessively to themes of relation and arousal, language and

bodies, and militarization and capitalism. My analysis focuses on the points of connection and tension between form and content in the collection to identify the affective responses *Common Place* seems to want to elicit from its reader. Following the critical example of Lauren Berlant, I also attend to places in the text where there is a gap between the response the text seems to desire and the response I actually experience as a reader, looking to these moments of misalignment as critically productive, as creating space for new ideas about how to feel and read to be antiwar.

Aesthetic Feeling and Structures of Feeling the “War on Terror”

One reason *Common Place* turns toward what I will describe as a strategy of feeling at all costs⁷ is its understanding of what an art object can or should do. Take this call to action, for instance: “if the good life depends on the exclusion of a detainee’s unremarkable organs, let’s stimulate a pleasure commensurable to that ethical violence and imagine community where it’s been rendered impossible” (91). Rather than putting faith in a literary work’s ability to communicate *information* about the experience of the violence of war (whether that information concerns what happened or what it felt like), as Hersey and the VVAW attempted in their literary products, *Common Place* is concerned with the ways in which texts impact us sensually and how they can elicit bodily responses by assembling atmospheric affects, literally arousing their readers to given states of embodied feeling.

My reading of *Common Place* and the broader arguments about anti-“forever wars” sentiment and antiwar experimental queer poetry rest on the presumption that Halpern is trying to

⁷ I am thinking about the aesthetic theory Halpern is putting into practice in *Common Place* as not exactly in line with but reminiscent of literary scholar Ian Fleischman’s readings of Franz Kafka’s “aestheticism” as “injury for the sake of injury,” wherein literature functions as a means of wounding the reader in order to further sensitize them to suffering, and of Bataille’s fascination with/attraction to the image of a lingchi torture victim, wherein Bataille internalizes the excess of pain the image channels to him in order to “ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin” (which I take to mean, that which is invested in upholding existing norms and institutions): Ian Fleischman, *An Aesthetics of Injury: The Narrative Wound from Baudelaire to Tarantino* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018) 50, 98.

evoke an aesthetic feeling with his poetry. My use of the term “aesthetic feeling” involves a double articulation: first, the text seeks to elicit from its audience an affective response (makes you feel) in its capacity *as an art object*, and then, it demands critical reflection *about* how you are feeling. Lauren Berlant justifies her focus on the affective valences of cultural production, writing in *Cruel Optimism*, the “senses mediate all knowledge and ideology, after all, and what we call ‘political persuasion’ must entail shaping political affections.”⁸ With Berlant’s words in mind, I understand the work of this chapter—analyzing the aesthetic theory embedded into *Common Place* alongside my critical response to the text—as affording the opportunity to sharpen an argument for why thinking about feeling as it relates to and can be brought into being by aesthetic experience is central to understanding the political project of antiwar literature.⁹ The questions at the heart of the consideration of *Common Place* in this chapter, then, are: what sort of aesthetic feeling does the text evoke, and what is the political value of this project?

Common Place highlights Halpern’s poet-critic-ness: he is writing poetry, and integrated into the creative process is a reflexivity *about* the aesthetic practice of poetry. The feelings that are then communicated to his readers are, at least in part, *critical* emotions about aesthetic practice.¹⁰ The intention to provoke feeling via aesthetic experience is made explicit in the text in a “meta” moment in the poem “Nocturnal Residua.” The poem opens with a description of the speaker’s discomfort at participating in a casual discussion following his reading of the poems from *Common*

⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 243.

⁹ Here, I am thinking about affect, in the context of aesthetic experience, as both “relational and transformative”: Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2008) 12. *Relational* in that affect is a necessary pre-existing ingredient of aesthetic experience (along the lines of Flatley’s sense of mood, in that there has to preexist some sort of feeling that your engagement with the art builds on, challenges, dampens, etc.—although importantly, affect requires an object whereas mood does not) and *transformative* as in something that is becomes a resulting feeling because of the aesthetic experience, which might be said to channel, prod, encourage, or direct the affect to take a given form.

¹⁰ All this criticality is another layer added on top of the imagining of queer intimacy between an American and a Yemeni body that is in turn a mediation of the leaked U.S. government autopsy report, which mediates the corpse.

Place. The conversation reminds the speaker, whom we can confidently identify as a performative version of Halpern himself, of an aspect of his poetic practice, which he then renders in a continually unfolding grammatical structure, a formal technique of deferral at work in much of the collection:

...which makes me think of Genet's campiness, at whose limit the extravagance of gesture gives way to purity of purpose, something I want to channel, the excess of that affect, give it body, arouse relation at the common place *the camp* where relation is prohibited, negate an alienation whose effects I'm feeling even now as I write, reaching for something beyond the current containment, something banished or withdrawn but from which the system nevertheless draws its energy, something that can't be admitted except allegorically, say, in the figure of a soldier's wound or my detainee's unremarkable genitalia, these things without reference, his body on a table, a radical thing betrayed on contact with my sentence, where syntax renders everything the same. (134)

The key pieces that make this textual moment so helpful for pointing out the privilege Halpern places on affect within his theory of the work of poetry are the invocation of Genet (and the expression of a desire "to channel" his literary technique) and the narration, as if in real time, of the writing practice as bound up with feeling and sociality.

As an example of the solicitation of an aesthetic feeling in *Common Place*, near the end of the first of the ten long poems in the book is the line: "just say the word *usufruct* and levitate" (18). The highlighting of "usufruct" as language (both via the use of "word" as its modifier and the italics), and language with a potentially incantatory effect, gives the impression that this is a key term for Halpern. "Usufruct" in its noun form means "right of temporary possession/use/enjoyment of the advantages of property belonging to another, so far as may be had without causing damage or prejudice to this."¹¹ Obviously, we can read Halpern's use of the detainee's body (or the US governmental autopsy report) as the central object of his poems as an instance of intended usufruction. However, the condition in the definition of the term that such use should not

¹¹ "usufruct, n.". OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/220702?rskey=XSA0T9&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed June 11, 2020).

cause damage or prejudice is, if we consider the “property” in question to be the detainee’s corpse, at the very least, up for debate, which makes me as a reader feel uncharitably towards Halpern’s placement of the term in a place of such significance in the poem at the beginning of this book. And then there is the fact that usufruct refers to property and so in this context references both the physical body as an object that can be owned, as well as the centrality of private property to capitalism. This layering of possible referents makes me question the tone of the original line of poetry: is it earnest? Facetious? Sardonic? The multiplicity of potential referents and interpretations behind this line, just one amidst the densely packed (typographically and metaphorically) 160-plus pages of *Common Place*, produces an affective confusion that hangs over specific fleeting feelings and prompts one to hesitate and to question what is going on.

My working theory regarding the political value of Halpern’s project is that *Common Place* provides an alternative structure of feeling¹² to the hegemonic structure of feeling of the post-Abu Ghraib US present moment of the text, which was centered around post-9/11 patriotism (narrowly defined), exclusion of the (racialized, Arab) Other, and deliberate forgetting.¹³ If, as I have argued

¹² “When certain objects produce a certain set of affects in certain contexts for certain groups of people— that is a structure of feeling”: Flatley 26.

¹³ Ann Pellegrini has argued that President George W. Bush’s semantic shift from labelling his administration’s military response to 9/11 a “war on terrorism” to a “war on terror” was a “strategic attempt to restructure public feeling.”: Ann Pellegrini, “Habeas Corpus: Behold the Body,” *TDR (1988-)* 52, no. 1 (2008) 181. Per Pellegrini, the “ban on just seeing the coffins of American war dead actually effects a ban on public mourning. The construction of a nation—of a public—ready and willing to fight and die for freedom (or at least ready and willing to send *someone else’s* sons and daughters off to war) requires this segregation, this privatization of loss” (180). Pellegrini goes back to Freud’s “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” to explain that in normal circumstances, we process death as an external phenomenon, grieving without a “reconciliation to loss or an acknowledgment of death. To recover something of life’s drama, our own vulnerability to death, we must turn to literature and theatre, Freud argues, to behold from a safe distance the risk of life and the finality of death” (180). Conversely, Freud writes that in wartime, “death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it”: “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” *Standard Edition Vol. XIV (1957)* 273-300, 291. Pellegrini goes on to argue that in wartime, death comes “with a force that the vicarious witnessing afforded by theatre or literature cannot command” and survivors are faced with a sense of “shared vulnerability” that “could be the grounds for a different kind of politics” (180), which Judith Butler reminds us could take the direction of either antiwar or pro-war (the latter via a fantasy of mastery that denies the vulnerability): Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 29. Pellegrini concludes with a rousing call to antiwar action: “Seizing every representational means possible, we must give death its due, acknowledge our shared vulnerability to loss, and refuse to shut up or shut down until we have put an end to the madness of endless war” (Pellegrini 181).

in previous chapters, a defining element of antiwar literature is its function as ideological contestation of the pro-war hegemonic state narrative, Halpern's poetry fits this description of antiwar literature and pushes it even further into affective territory as it leans into the contestation of dominant structures of feeling of the present moment.¹⁴ "What other feeling would be the right feeling to have," Halpern's speaker asks near the end of the third poem, "when feeling itself has become obscene"? (42). *Common Place* meditates on the impossibility of answering this question completely while nevertheless building the world of the poems such that a set of "other" feelings are elicited in contrast to the becoming-obscene of feeling which has prompted its question.

Halpern's project can be understood as invested in assembling a structure of feeling most clearly in the terms that Berlant gives to Williams's structures of feeling: as a name for the "affective residue that constitutes what is shared between strangers."¹⁵ A central question in *Common Place* is how relations can be established between strangers. The poems are also bursting with explicit references to excess while their formal construction illustrates an overflowing of the bounds of poetic (specifically, lyric) genre constraints and expectations. Formally, for instance, the collection is excessive by way of the juxtaposition of free-flowing prose poems with tightly metered lyrics. In this way, the work is reminiscent of that of Walt Whitman, one Halpern's poetic interlocutors.¹⁶ Thematically, the specific parts of the body that the text is most interested in—the

See David L. Eng, "The Value of Silence" *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 1 (2002) on rush to war post-9/11 as a refusal to mourn.

¹⁴ I follow Flatley's distinction and relation of ideologies and structures of feeling: "If the function of an ideology is to narrate our relation to a social order so as to make our daily experience of that order meaningful and manageable, then structure of feeling would be the term to describe the mediating structure—one just as socially produced as ideology—that facilitates and shapes our affective attachment to different objects in the social order" (26).

¹⁵ Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: 'Mysterious Skin,'" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 3 (2015): 191-213, 194.

¹⁶ Whitman scholar Mark Doty has theorized that Whitman's mixture of poetic forms is a formal representation of what is unsayable and yet must be communicated, writing "perhaps this irreconcilability lies behind the formal tensions between 'verse paragraphing' and the tight construct of the couplet; the transparency of one sits beside the opacity of the other, and the contradiction cannot be resolved, but instead must simply be accommodated": Mark Doty, "The Question of Homoeroticism in Whitman's Poetry," *Literary Hub* (April 14, 2020). <https://lithub.com/the-question-of-homoeroticism-in-whitmans-poetry/>.

penis, anus, and mouth, as well as the effluvia each secretes—indicate an interest in the exceeding of boundaries between interior and exterior.¹⁷ As an example of the way in which excess and relation are brought into contact at the site of the body, through the mode of sex, for the purpose of connection, recall an excerpt from an earlier quotation: “excess of that affect, give it body, arouse relation at the common place *the camp* where relation is prohibited.” If the “excess of that affect” is Williams and Berlant’s “affective residue,” Halpern is working poetically to transform it into a catalyst for a structure of feeling that fosters community where the existing structure served to prohibit relation.

To delve further into questions of how *Common Place* positions itself in contrast to the pro-war hegemonic structure of feeling of its present moment, the pillars of this structure of feeling must be accounted for. The hegemonic structure of feeling that Halpern’s text metabolizes—in the sense that it is absorbed into the poems and resurfaces, or in keeping with the metaphor, is excreted, as atmospheric details and assumptions on which the text rests and pushes back—is dependent on “homonationalism,” an exceptional form of homonormative nationalism. For Puar, homonationalism involves the demonization of the sexual other, the exclusion of the Arab/Muslim other, and the sense that these rejections provide security and freedom for the remaining citizens, so long as they demonstrate properly patriotic love for their nation. Puar shows that racial and anti-queer animus are combined in popular conceptions of both the “terrorist” as a figure that is perverse and deviant and of Islam as sexually restrictive.¹⁸ Mainstream liberal responses to the torture photo

¹⁷ The poems resist a reading of their plumbing of such border zones as an interest in abjection. “In order to arrive at love,” one poem reads, “I need to run straight thru disgust without stopping at abjection” (30). Literary scholar Christopher Schmidt argues that Halpern’s poetry’s “sexualized excremental preoccupation creates an excess or remainder within Halpern’s more determined conception of waste as a product of capital...It is through the *perverse-ity* of waste, and its affective shock to what is proper, that the project adumbrates the political potential of the poetic”: Christopher Schmidt, *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 165.

¹⁸ “At this historical juncture, the invocation of the terrorist as a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other has become part of the normative script of the U.S. war on terror,” and “this interpretation of sexual norms in the Middle

scandal of Abu Ghraib played into these aspects of homonationalism by treating the sexual violence that proliferated in the photos as exceptionally bad and as an exceptional occurrence (as in, an outlier).¹⁹

In his reimaginings of the civilian detainee who had been classified as a terrorist by the US military, Halpern takes a pointedly prurient approach to his speaker's relation to the detainee, suggesting the contestation of a homonationalist structure of feeling. Poet Stephen Boyer reviewed *Common Place*, writing that the collection "at best...reads as a testament to preserving queer sexuality's perversity" but that the "question remains over whether Halpern's sexualization of understanding is another portrayal of the wrongs of the Western imagination."²⁰ I sympathize with Boyer's ambivalence, in which we are joined by Halpern's speaker, and I am reminded by it of a line from "Is the Rectum a Grave?" that notes, "while it is indisputably true that sexuality is always being politicized, the ways in which *having sex* politicizes are highly problematic."²¹ In the specific context of *Common Place* with the detainee as its object, the reparative (and therefore antiwar) element of the practice of "devotional kink" at the core of Halpern's creative work takes on an added urgency, but at the same time the reparative nature of its approach is troubled by echoes of the very objectification that powers the "war on terror."

As the moniker for the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suggests, feelings of terror were particularly encouraged to justify aggressive militarized surveillance, detention, violence, and death. The "war is on terror and not simply fear because fear has an object, while terror leaks

East—sexuality is repressed, but perversity is just bubbling beneath the surface—forms part of a centuries-long Orientalist tradition": Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007) 37, 83.

¹⁹ See the chapter of Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* on "Abu Ghraib and U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism," 79-113.

²⁰ Stephen Boyer, "Review of *Common Place*," *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 247 (April-May 2016) 30.

²¹ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" October 43 (Winter, 1987), 197-222, 206.

potentially into all spaces of experience.”²² Excess, leakiness, and formlessness are all qualities that were deemed terrifying by the US government in the wake of 9/11 and the lead-up to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and they were later transformed into qualities necessary to the US military strategy in these wars.²³ I am thinking, too, of the ways in which surveillance of US citizens, previously protected constitutionally from such invasions of privacy, leaked into acceptability via the Patriot Act—and of “indefinite detention” and “enhanced interrogation” of “enemy combatants” as rhetorical efforts to contain practices that are *in excess of* US criminal and international law.²⁴ *Common Place* rearticulates excess, leakiness, and formlessness in an attempt to arouse new feelings, relations, and possible futures that contest the alienation that the US war strategy depends upon its citizens to accept.

A primary method for encouraging the US public to look past this war-sustaining objectification, of which torture is a particularly spectacular form, was to tether one’s own security (national and personal) to the necessity of excluding “terrorists” or “enemy combatants” (notoriously fungible labels) from the category of the human—that is, from the expectation of being treated with “human dignity.”²⁵ Feeling personally threatened makes it easier to accept or

²² Berlant, “The Epistemology of State Emotion,” *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004) 46-78, 67.

²³ “As the Enemy is perceived to have no shape, to produce an enigmatic and therefore lawless anti-American crusade, then the U.S. state too must assume a kind of hyperbolic formlessness.”: Berlant, “State Emotion” 68.

²⁴ Daniel Fried, Special Envoy for Closure of the Guantanamo Detainee Facility, tasked by the US State Department with coordinating the military prison’s closure, calls it the US government’s “original sin” because “Guantanamo was neither grounded in the laws of war nor in criminal justice. And once you have established a system outside of either international or U.S. law, which this was, then it’s very hard to reintegrate it back into a legal framework”: Latif Nasser, Suzie Lechtenberg, Sarah Qari and Annie McEwen, “The Other Latif: Episode 6,” March 17, 2020, in *Radiolab*, produced by WNYC, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/other-latif-episode-6>.

²⁵ Ranjana Khanna astutely points out the ways in which the concept of “dignity” in discourse surrounding global human rights “presents a notion of the subject that has no room for difference,” specifically queerness: “no room at all for desiring what is not normal, for desiring debasement, or even for nonmonogamous relationships”: Khanna, “Indignity,” *positions* 16.1 (Spring 2008) 39-77, 57.

even call for the exclusion of others.²⁶ Politicians and news anchors, communicating via genres that work to shape public opinion through emotional appeals, link the feeling of being personally threatened with the desire for normalcy, per Berlant, by “shuttl[ing] between negative emotions related to personally felt threat and scenes that sustain and give moral distinction to attachments to the comforts of normativity even if the conditions for the ideal-normative good life have not actually existed.”²⁷ At the same time, being hailed as part of a public in your attachment to normativity paradoxically allows for isolation of yourself from others. Having *collective feelings* in response to news media that tells you as a member of the American public how to feel about events that are constantly being broadcast live in the privacy of your own home can lead to a retreat from collective political *action*, because what you are being encouraged to do is passively watch and listen.²⁸

The hegemonic structure of feeling of the “war on terror” further disincentivized collective political action by enforcing strict adherence to a singular interpretation of patriotism: “even to pursue nuanced thought was deemed a performance of antipatriotism.”²⁹ Halpern's commitment to complication and crossing moral lines should, I contend, be read in this context as a pushing back on the hegemonic structure of feeling by introducing layers of nuance. Despite this, the transgressive moments in *Common Place* retain the risk of an aesthetic response of intensely felt

²⁶ As Puar puts it, referencing Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's writing on the “state of exception”: “State of exception discourses rationalize egregious violence in the name of the preservation of a way of life and those privileged to live it.” (9).

²⁷ Berlant, “State Emotion” 51. Because 9/11 was broadcast live as it happened, media outlets set the tone for the American public emotional response. “Quickly, though, the administration borrowed the sensationalist energy from the media's nationalization of trauma. The subjects of imperiled privilege were this time identified *tout court* as ordinary innocent “Americans,” and the Bush administration repeatedly equated justice with the demolition of the (at first) unnamed and invisible perpetrators who created Americans as a species haunted by the Terror”: Berlant, “State Emotion” 66.

²⁸ On liveness, public feeling, and a retreat from the political, see Berlant, “State Emotion” 49-51.

²⁹ Berlant, “State Emotion” 46.

discomfort and even a vehement, visceral objection to the terms being set by the poems *Take*, for example, this moment late in the collection:

Lying two inches above a red-hot flame, his limbs now frightfully dislocated, slowly melt as his trunk is lowered into a brazier, allowing me time to carve away several chunks of flesh selected from diverse areas. I'm then obliged to burn the interior of his rectum, which I've fucked without pomade before discharging and falling half-conscious into an armchair. This is the moment where my lucid mind inhabits his skin, which I've tried to render real. (Halpern 130)

How to avoid joining the anti-nuance ranks of George W. Bush while suggesting that, despite the presumably genuine reparative intent behind Halpern's commitment to complexity, there remains an unavoidable truth about the power relation being played out between the speaker and the detainee/corpse at certain points in *Common Place* that is rehearsing the degradation of the racialized Other by the state? While the insistent focus on the detainee corpse is an ever-present feature of *Common Place*, it is at the same time one of the authorial choices that goes untheorized in a book that seems compelled to comment upon itself as it goes. The objectification of Al Hanashi is therefore somehow unstated despite its unavoidability.

At a fundamental level, the centrality of the detainee corpse in *Common Place* serves as a rebuttal of a mainstay of the hegemonic narrative of the "war on terror," which is a refusal to show or look at the war dead. Because of this refusal, representations of the corpse—particularly the corpse that is racially coded as Arabic or/and Muslim—could be considered a notable barometer of cultural production about and in the era of the "war on terror." Narratives that actively support or passively condone the US wars and military occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan often do so by downplaying the wars' death toll or focusing on the military technology (primarily, the increasing reliance on drone strikes) instead of the people the machines target, while opposition to the wars frequently features a sustained focus on the dead and the killing. In this way, pro- and anti-war narratives might confidently be identified by the proximity of corpses to their theses. Mainstream

journalistic coverage of the wars, influenced by government censorship policies, featured blank spaces where corpses would have been. This specific vacuum was produced, in part, by Bush administration decisions not to provide statistics regarding the number of Iraqi and Afghani civilian deaths in the wars.³⁰ The sea burial of Osama bin Laden's corpse is another high-profile incidence of the deliberate concealment of a racialized body in the spirit of promoting support for the US war effort.

US Marines veteran of the Iraq war and author Phil Klay's short story "Ten Kliks South" thematized the centrality of the missing racialized corpse to the experience "war on terror," with characters back at the base doing math to determine how many insurgents their artillery team had killed with their long-range ICM (Improved Conventional Munitions) gun: "Divide it by nine Marines on the gun, and you, personally, you've killed zero point seven something people today. That's like, a torso and a head. Or maybe a torso and a leg."³¹ In response to a Marine who says, "I don't *feel* like I killed anybody," the Sergeant in Klay's story tells him, "you wouldn't know. Not until you'd seen the bodies."³² In light of this systematic concealment of the corpses of the "war on terror," Halpern's placement of the detainee at the center of his poetic ruminations can be read as a direct rejection of the hegemonic desire to remove such subjects from the official narrative of the war(s). In this respect, *Common Place* makes common cause with several Iraqi literary texts that treat the U.S. invasion by centering the corpse.³³

³⁰ See Jonathan S. Landay, "Study Says Violence in Iraq Has Been Underreported," *McClatchy Newspapers* (7 Dec. 2006), archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20061210001128/http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/1207-05.htm>; Andrew Buncombe, "Aid Worker Uncovered America's Secret Tally of Iraqi Civilian Deaths," *Independent/UK* (20 Apr. 2005), archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070101201208/http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0420-07.htm>.

³¹ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014) 272.

³² Klay 273.

³³ A selection of such works includes Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*, trans. Jonathan Wright (NY: Penguin Books, 2013); Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer* (2010; New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013); Saadawi, Ahmed, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, trans. Jonathan Wright (NY: Penguin Books, 2018). I come back to these texts at the close of the essay.

Reading *Common Place*

Common Place is the fourth book-length poetry collection in a sequence of works by Halpern that include *Rumored Place* (2004), *Disaster Suites* (2009) and *Music for Porn* (2012), with *Weak Link* (2019) a collection of “interstitial work” from this oeuvre.³⁴ Although *Common Place* is part of the “serial work” these four titles comprise, I focus my analysis primarily on *Common Place* in its own right because of its unique use of the autopsy report as a documentary source and the focus on the corpse of the detainee that follows from this formal decision. *Common Place* demonstrates Halpern’s continued interest in thinking the linguistic and the bodily together, a project that he explores through his professional channels as a poet, scholar, and teacher.³⁵ The clearest link to the tactic Halpern adopts for *Common Place* is the use of US military site reports (among other documents) as source material for the long poem “Obscene Intimacies” in *Music for Porn*. While as a work of docu-poetry that takes US military practice as an object of focus, and frankly based on the title alone, “Obscene Intimacies” might be viewed as a type of precursor to *Common Place*, the book-length work is distinct because it is both engaged with and mediated by a single historical document for the duration of the work, this document taking as its focus the

The centrality of the corpse to *Common Place* and these works is in stark contrast to the representation of Iraqis and Afghans (dead or living) in more mainstream U.S. literature that has emerged as part of the 21st century “boom” in veteran literature. Critically acclaimed examples of such texts include Klay’s *Redeployment* and Brian Turner’s poetry collection *Here, Bullet* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2005). For a critical response to the latter, see Sinan Antoon, “Embedded Poetry: Iraq; Through a Soldier’s Binoculars,” *Jadaliyya*, June 11, 2014.

³⁴ “Weak Link,” *Small Press Distribution*, 2020. <https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9781891190421/weak-link.aspx>.

One through line of my survey of antiwar literature involves artists looking toward available legal systems and finding them lacking. VVAW tried to expose US war crimes and violations of the Geneva convention that were so ubiquitous as to render them unactionable or, rather, below the level of attention that insists upon action being taken. *Common Place* starts from an understanding that legal justice is out of the question, which has its own problems, and instead looks to poetry and intimacy as reparative.

³⁵ For example, Halpern’s Eastern Michigan University faculty page lists a recent creative writing workshop he taught titled “Somatic Writing (language, body, text)”: “Rob Halpern,” *Eastern Michigan University* (2020). <https://www.emich.edu/english/faculty/r-halpern.php>. His scholarly publications include “Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative” for the *Journal of Narrative* 41, no. 1 (2011): 82-124. doi:10.1353/jnt.2011.0092.

ultimately lethal effects of the post-9/11 US policies of profiling, surveillance, indefinite detention, and enhanced interrogation based on race, gender, and religious affiliation. That said, because most of the scholarship about Halpern's poetry to date focuses on texts other than *Common Place* (primarily *Music for Porn*), I will bring in discussion of other works when relevant to integrate my reading of *Common Place* into the existing scholarly conversation on Halpern's creative work, while also pointing to Halpern's academic writing when it makes sense to do so.

In analyzing the form and content of *Common Place* with an eye to aesthetic feeling, I will simultaneously attempt to isolate what I deem to be significant formal and thematic elements of the collection while also showing the deeply entangled—and therefore inseparable—nature of these components. The formal components of special note are what I will oxymoronicly call repetitious formlessness, as well as enjambment and lyric apostrophe. The key themes to be explored are capitalism and war, excess and relation, and language and the (human) body. The title of the first poem in the collection, “A Square, A Cell, A Sentence,” provides an immediate demonstration of the interconnectedness of the themes of the collection. Each of the three nouns in the title carry multiple meanings, signaling the intertwining themes of capitalism (a market square), (imprisoned) bodies (a slave market square, a prison cell or sentence, a cellular organism), and language (a grammatical sentence). Later in the same poem, a stanza concludes: “profit turns up in my stool” (14).³⁶ This phrase (grammatically, a complete sentence, but denied or denying finality because it is preceded by a comma and followed by an enjambed hyphen at the beginning of the next stanza) illustrates Halpern's theory of capitalism as an embodied process, literally functioning as one's metabolic system. The passive construction of the verb “turns up”

³⁶ This line is reminiscent of a pair of lines from Charles Bernstein's poem “The Sixties, with Apologies,” which read, “The blood on George Bush's / Hands keeps coming out in my stool”: Charles Bernstein, “The Sixties, with Apologies,” *The Wolf* 28 (July 2013). Bay Area contemporaries of Halpern's, poets Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, include these Bernstein lines in an epigraph for *An Army of Lovers* (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 2013).

establishes that one's conscious involvement is not required for one to be used by and implicated in the profitmaking metabolism. Here, profit equals human waste, with "excess" as the concept enabling the equalizing.³⁷ *Common Place* enlists excess as a concept that both theorizes 21st c. US war and capitalism and gestures toward a mode of being-with others that is anticapitalist and antiwar.

Repetitious Formlessness

I earlier referred to as oxymoronic my use of "repetitious formlessness" to describe certain poems because "formless" is often taken to mean unshaped (something is formless because we haven't done anything to it yet), whereas the act of repetition in poetry makes apparent the poet's shaping presence behind the curtain of composition. Formlessness is therefore traditionally associated with passivity and a natural and/or unproductive state of being. This mainstream sense of "formless" indicates a method of writing that is meant to seem as if it is being put down on paper in real time, as the thoughts come into the poet's head, without molding or revision. But when formlessness is a constantly reiterated (and, as such, markedly deliberate) aspect of the poetic form of a text, the labor of such formlessness comes into view.

I read the repetitious formlessness of many sections of *Common Place* as a potential alternative, third category outside of French theorist and author Georges Bataille's two options for the (antiwar) work of art. Early in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes that to avoid war "we must divert the surplus production, either into the rational extension of a different industrial growth, or

³⁷ Ranjana Khanna argues for "disposability" as a concept that makes a similar connection between capitalism's dual forms of wastefulness: capitalism's excesses render a subset of people disposable *and* produce disposable income for a subset of people. She makes a political argument for psychoanalysis as a lens through which to analyze disposability that is in line with Halpern's poetic project: "psychoanalysis stresses the moments of vulnerability of the subject, which is indeed launched by the recognition of the importance of waste matter and the desires associated with it": Ranjana Khanna, "Disposability," *differences* 20, no. 1 (2009) 181-198, 196.

into unproductive works.”³⁸ Art is one such unproductive work. In its syphoning excess away from the capitalist system, art is connected to Bataille’s theoretical and creative interest in transgression, or norm-breaking, which he took to be indispensable for sexual arousal and to provide a basis for other affective states such as disgust.³⁹ Importantly, for Bataille, the excess energy is in constant need of release, and “relieving the blockage was always, if only in the darkest region of consciousness, the object of a feverish pursuit.”⁴⁰ In *Common Place*, such release, which is explicitly sexualized and tinged with shame and death, is a major theme. By contrast, for the policymakers responsible for US militarization, such constant buildup and release of excess only serves to rationalize a seemingly constant policy of creating or involving the nation in *more* wars and military situations that feed so directly into the economic system that this connection has been colloquially known for the better part of a century as the military-industrial complex.⁴¹ Even as Halpern’s poetry shares with Bataille’s theory an interest in release (and, with Bataille’s concept of the *informé*, a focus on becoming), rather than unproductive or otherwise productive, I posit that formlessness in *Common Place* is deconstructive.

If all of one’s erotic energy is poured into a dead body, then there is theoretically no excess energy for the capitalist system to syphon off. Bataille is interested in how transgression gets *reintegrated* into the system. Is Halpern performing modes of labor that in their aspiration to formlessness engage differently with logics of value? In his effort to be in relation with “his”

³⁸ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: an Essay on General Economy, Vol. 1: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1991) 25.

³⁹ Scholar of philosophy and art history Gavin Grindon summarizes Bataille’s theory of base materialism as: “All repressed and taboo affects are necessarily those with the greatest revolutionary potential. All that was lowest, dirtiest and excluded possessed revolutionary force”: Gavin Grindon, “Alchemist of the Revolution: The Affective Materialism of Georges Bataille,” *Third Text* 24, no. 3 (May 2010) 305-17, 307.

⁴⁰ Bataille 24.

⁴¹ For example, in Chalmers Johnson’s *Nemesis*, the author provides the example of such extreme, continuous expense in the US’s push for military advances into space, writing that “as a cash cow, missile defense goes on enriching its sponsors precisely when it is not working and they have to go back to their drawing boards”: Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006) 229.

detainee via a poetics of repetitious formlessness, is Halpern, as speaker and poet, working to extricate sex, love, and compassion from the capitalist system that has (re)absorbed these forms of relational intimacy?⁴² If the act of labor of an artwork is to deconstruct rather than to formalize, that is, if the productivity of the work comes in the form not of producing but of *undoing* existing systems, then we end up in an encounter with thanatos, the drive to decompose, to concern oneself with abjection, to deform. The fantasy that takes place at the midpoint of *Common Place*, in a subsection of “Hocus-Pocus (2)” titled “The Ligature,” concludes with the speaker’s present-tense narration of reducing the detainee’s corpse to nothing: “I rub him down with alcohol and ignite the body, tightening the cord upon discharge, making further examination unnecessary” (70). That such an impulse to deform runs counter to the traditional understanding of aesthetics as a means of beautifying through form means that, in using his poetry to fuck (and, in “The Ligature,” incinerate) the detainee’s corpse, Halpern seems to be targeting art itself for deconstruction, having become fully disenchanted with it as a vehicle for a reparative politics.

As briefly alluded to, that which is “formless” is also evocative of Bataille’s concept of the *informé*, which attends to the ways in which the continual restructuring of poetic material foregrounds process and becoming. Ian Fleischman makes the connection between Bataille and one of his literary influences, Franz Kafka, explaining that, for Kafka, perpetual self-fragmentation and becoming—literarily represented as formlessness—made space for new meaning. Bersani views the de-subjectifying, “self-shattering” effects of gay sex and sexuality as similarly opening

⁴² Literary scholar Lee Spinks writes of what I am proposing as Halpern’s aesthetics of undoing in his 2009 poetry collection *Disaster Suites*, the “key to this reversal lies in an exorbitant element, a surplus or excess beyond surplus value, which reveals itself in those moments when the immaterial production of labour as linguistic collaboration recreates language use as a form of virtuosic performance irreducible to exchangeable ends. To the extent that the emergence of immaterial labour as aesthetic poiesis prevents the expropriation of public language, it offers Halpern a possible model for lyric as a mode of countercommunication which might reorient our sense of the common to everything that is missing from the common places of thought and speech”: Lee Spinks, “Still Clinging to Disaster: Reading Rob Halpern’s *Disaster Suites*,” *Intertexts* 19, nos. 1-2 (2016) 117-133, 122.

up new possibilities, specifically by way of a reduction of harm (nonviolence).⁴³ Fleischman argues that Kafka's generativity via formlessness came about through his representation of the "wound as a text and the text as a wound."⁴⁴ Halpern weaves a similarly tight and ongoing web in *Common Place* between the body as text and the text (the report, the poetry) as bringing the body into being, where being could impart either liveness or relatability. The speaker and Halpern the poet can only relate to the detainee via the autopsy report, as is acknowledged by the line, "this body's truth, which doesn't exist anterior to the report that documents it" (28). If the repeated narrations of recurring dreams and fantasies are a formal instantiation of Halpern's thematic commitment to formlessness as a refusal of the lure of closure, what sorts of new meaning are made available by this text? Considering the ways in which *this* body and *this* documentary source text are politically charged, what potential meanings are foreclosed?

Enjambment and Flow

My examination of enjambment in *Common Place* is organized around the two modes of aesthetic experience of the poems—reading the poems as text on the page and hearing them read aloud, at a public reading or otherwise—because each reveal certain formal aspects of the text.

⁴³ "If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence. Gay men's 'obsession' with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated—not because of its communal virtues, not because of its subversive potential for parodies of machismo, not because it offers a model of genuine pluralism to a society that at once celebrates and punishes pluralism, but rather because it never stops representing the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice": Bersani 222.

⁴⁴ The "wound is by no means a metaphorical representation of an external, preexisting reality, but rather it constitutes a reality in its own right; this is the *semiotic*, even *ontological*, component of what I am calling Kafka's *aestheticism* and how I will continue to define the term throughout this book: (1) if the author represents the wound as a text and text as a wound, then both terms are simultaneously the *signifier* and the *signified* of one another; (2) but the difference between wound-qua-text and text-qua-wound reveals the wound *itself* as a figure of difference, of non-self-identity; (3) thus perpetually self-fragmenting, the figure is also always in becoming, never achieving a definitive (narrative) form" and, furthermore, "This wound is both the site of the failure of language and the opening through which meaning can continue to be made—precisely *by* that failing, by the fact that arrival at a definitive referent has been refused": Fleischman 61, 62.

Specifically, in thinking through the experience of reading and hearing the poems, we can draw out the ways in which enjambment and its opposite—a lack of line breaks or sentence-dividing punctuation—shape the flow of the text and, in doing so, evoke certain aesthetic feelings and desires.

For instance, if the poems are encountered visually by a reader, the enjambments will be obvious and striking. An example of this visual effect can be found in the one of the five subsections titled “False Communiqué” in the long poem “Hocus Pocus (1)”:

And as if to discredit all protest
-ant thought as ephemeral med
-ical treatment facility efforts fail ... (55)

Enjambed here are not complete thoughts or even phrases but individual words. The enjambed words resemble tortured bodies: stems of words wrenched from prefixes and suffixes, held up on the pikes of hyphens. This goes beyond the sort of enjambment that is typical of lyric poetry, wherein threads of thought are broken across lines to create experiences of shock, confusion, or surprise in the reader.⁴⁵ Rather, the idea of the word as a solid and reliable container of meaning is formally exploded, in much the same way that the idea of the human body and the transcendental subject are thematically destabilized. In poems like “Hocus Pocus (1)” that are broken into stanzas of short, heavily enjambed lines, the enjambments function to violently break up the poem(s), formally frustrating and resisting the desire for connection that runs throughout the text.

⁴⁵ As an example of this more expected use of enjambment, take a stanza from Brian Turner’s poem “16 Iraqi Policemen,” from his collection *Here, Bullet* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2005):

The shocking blood of the men
forms an obscene art: a moustache, alone
on a sidewalk, a blistered hand’s gold ring
still shining, while a medic, Doc Lopez,
pauses to catch his breath, to blow it out
hard, so he might cup the left side of a girl’s face
in one hand, gently, before bandaging
the half gone missing. (30)

This desire for connection is manifested in the text by the repeated use of words and phrases—such as “deciduous mulch,” a term used twice in the first poem of the book, floating in both instances without referent, and later repeated as a pointed metaphor for pubic hair—almost as touchstones, sprinkled through the poems to link them through diction as well as theme. At a few points in the book, Halpern’s speaker refers self-reflexively to these repeated phrases, along with the stock phrases of the autopsy report, as “linguistic readymades.”⁴⁶ The term “readymades” is a reference to the artform popularized by Marcel Duchamp, wherein a found object is recontextualized as a work of art; Halpern’s use of this term demonstrates self-awareness and self-critique of his role in producing poetry out of the autopsy report. “Linguistic readymades” as a poetic descriptor also provides commentary about the report as a piece of text itself, indicating the impersonal and relentlessly dehumanizing impact of a document whose purpose is to record, in minutest detail, the bodily evidence of a person’s once-and-no-longer-existence. By using the same term to refer to his own repeated word choice, Halpern demonstrates self-awareness that while his speaker longs to enliven the corpse by fantasizing about him through poetry, his poems can take on the same rote, plugged-in, and, by extension, dehumanizing effect.⁴⁷

Reading the poems at one’s own pace with the ability to physically shift back and forth through the pages of the text also brings with it the temptation to repeat readings until one achieves comprehension of the poems’ grammatical-logical structure: an attempt at mastery that is resisted by the form of the poems. For example, the section of “Hocus Pocus (2)” titled “Contribution to a

⁴⁶ Solmaz Sharif is another contemporary poet interested in the poetic refashioning of militarized language. Her recent collection *Look* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016) uses the US Department of Defense’s *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* as a documentary source. See literary scholar Walt Hunter on the ways in which Solmaz’s poetic project exposes the entanglements of the English language and militarization in the Coda to *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) 121-126.

⁴⁷ The lines juxtaposed at the beginning of this chapter are worth repeating here: “as if my own sentences possessed some restorative force to bring the body back” (25), “though it’s not like that at all, as if transcription could animate the dead” (31).

Critique of My Philosophy of Ardor,” midway through the collection, is a single sentence stretching over two pages and nine-plus stanzas. Despite the organization of the poem into stanzas, which several prose poems in the collection disavow to similar (but denser, more crushing) overwhelming effect, the lack of punctuation breaking the poem into discrete segments results in a serpentine and seemingly endless thought that refuses to provide the reader with a place to pause and reflect. A similar sensation is generated in “A Square, A Cell, A Sentence,” with its proliferous commas, producing muddy relations between strings of dependent clauses and lists of objects that never quite cohere in a way that is comprehensible. For example,

a bone in my ass, where all future relation resides, if
 only I could feel the structure of marketable risk, or
 even its idea, the world entrenched inside his meat,
 worn lace, the latch ... (17)

Despite the lack of coherence, in all the poems in the collection, enough connections are signposted to make such doubling-back on the part of the reader feel like it will pay off in some level of understanding. In this way, the formal arrangement of the poems seems to invite commentary on their subject matter: the full scale of global capitalism too big to wrap one’s head around; US militarism too brutal, itself too concerned with the idea of mastery over or subjugation of bodies; the purported goal of the poetic project folding in on its own impossibility. In this respect, the poems also gesture to the origin of their source material in a massive data dump by Wikileaks that takes in, in its size, a sense of too-vastness reminiscent of Kant’s mathematical sublime. Halpern’s explicit manipulation of the leaked report into poetry gives it not the stupefying effect war literature scholar Patrick Deer ascribes to the “embedded sublime” of war reportage in his unpublished article “‘Despicable Beauty’: The Embedded Sublime and Ethical Hesitation in Iraq War Reportage” but rather a feeling that, although uncertain due to the lack of places to stop and

collect oneself, is interactive. The reader may not know quite how to relate to the poems, but the poems solicit their relation all the same.

Then, on the other hand, when one's aesthetic experience of the poems comes as a listener at a public reading, the poetic material is sensed primarily auditorily⁴⁸ (but also visually-as-embodied by the poet-performer),⁴⁹ with the result that the formlessness that begs for re-readings is experienced instead as an *overflow* of information, phrases flowing past, perhaps standing out in repetition, but always pressing on, impossible to fully process in real time. When heard aloud, the poems show that attempting mastery is a fool's errand. Where a reader might conclude that such mastery is impossible but only *after* they have found the text to be resistant to summary or resolution, a listener would understand the poems to be rejecting the premise of a graspable totality from the get-go.

The question of totality is raised in a line of "Hoc Est Corpus," which declares: "His body, being the thing that holds us all together, must be the truth of the transcendental subject upon which every notion of justice rests" (29). Here the detainee's corpse is shown to be not only the "common place" at the center of the text but also the key to community (the "thing that holds us all together") and the potential, at least theoretically, for justice. By referring to "every notion of justice," the poem signals a knowing use of the term as a state of being that is promised, per classical liberal ideology, by absolute knowledge. What is the corpse, exactly, in this equation? The thing about which Halpern feels compelled to gain absolute understanding? As the "truth of

⁴⁸ Recordings of Halpern reading poems from *Common Place*, and other material, are archived at "Rob Halpern," *PennSound* (2015). <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Halpern.php>.

⁴⁹ A later poem in *Common Place*, "Nocturnal Residua," takes a public poetry reading as its setting. Its first line ("Reading these poems in public makes me feel sick.") creates the impossible situation in which Halpern the poems' speaker is reading the poem as Halpern the poet writes it (133).

the transcendental subject,” does the corpse need to do the understanding? Puar argues that queer intersectional analysis

holds queer of color organizing and theorizing to impossible standards and expectations, always beholden to spaces and actions of resistance, transgression, subversion. In the last instance, all (of one’s) identities (not just gender and sexual) must be constantly troubled, leading to *an impossible transcendent subject* who is always already conscious of the normativizing forces of power and always ready and able to subvert, resist, or transgress them.⁵⁰

Is *Common Place* perpetuating this kind of uneven distribution of responsibility for resistance (antiwar or otherwise) in placing the burden of the potential for transcendence on the detainee? Or, instead, is the text, in its formalized ungraspability, resisting the dispensation of such a burden in the same breath as it admits the desirability of some universal truth?

Lyric Apostrophe

By returning again and again to a mode of fantasy that hinges on the utopian hope that desire might be capable of bringing lost objects (back) to life, Halpern renders the poems an arena for working through the nuances of a traditional element of lyric poetry: the reanimation of a corpse. When the corpse in question died because of a war Halpern views himself to be complicit in waging, this lyric tradition is transformed into a direct assault on projects aimed at revealing what is otherwise hidden by the state or exposing the abuses of the state. While traditionally, the lyric addresses the dead as a means for redressing an injury from the past, an action now only possible in the world of the poem,⁵¹ Halpern earnestly attempts but ultimately rejects even the possibility of this sort of closure, a self-reflexive line early in the collection reading, “*as if* my own sentences possessed some restorative force to bring the body back” (25, emphasis added). Later, a similar construction reads, “I transcribe the words of his autopsy report while reading them aloud

⁵⁰ Puar 23-24, emphasis added.

⁵¹ For a classic example of such a poetic encounter with the dead, see Wilfred Owen, “The Man I Killed,” *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1963).

as if to cast a spell that will revive some residual feeling in the negative space of his body” (81, emphasis added). The heavy lifting done by this “as if,” a recurring grammatical setup throughout *Common Place*, allows Halpern’s speaker to articulate the baldly reparative desire at the center of the poems while preemptively communicating his awareness of this desire as fantastic, unrealistic, impossible. There is, ultimately, “nothing / Equal to yr body / —in labor language or love” (104). The way in which Halpern artfully rearticulates the leaked autopsy report prods the reader to ask: how many leaks would it take to bring a dead person back to life? How many poems? Instead of a classic deployment of lyrical apostrophe in the interest of closure, Halpern addresses the corpse of the detainee in a manner that raises question after question, not only about the “war on terror” and its ability to kill the detainee but also about the literary strategy he is presently engaged in, with its implied goal of trying to rectify the detainee’s death.

Throughout *Common Place*, Halpern employs both a poetic voice and stanza form that conform to and exceed the limits of the traditional lyric poem. Feminist scholar Barbara Johnson called apostrophe “almost synonymous with the lyric voice” in her landmark essay on the topic.⁵² For Johnson, apostrophe “involves the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker” and “is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.”⁵³ Halpern’s speaker addresses the corpse directly at a few points in the collection. One instance, in “The Ligature,” provides a summative description of the poetic project: “Yr body, my devotional kink,” the speaker says, continuing, “what do I mean when I say ‘I burn with love for you’? I’m still seeking a lyric structure that might allow me to ask this question” (68).⁵⁴ Another instance, quoted

⁵² Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986) 28-47, 28.

⁵³ Barbara Johnson 28-30.

⁵⁴ As “The Ligature” shows, Halpern inserts features of the lyric poem into his entire poetic project, not only those poems in *Common Place* whose forms look more traditionally lyric.

previously, confronts the futility of the continual attempts at such a devotional practice (“I’m *still* seeking”) by closing with the lines, “My poems...being nothing / Equal to yr body / —in labor language or love” (104). Beyond these obvious examples of apostrophe, I would argue that the more frequent instances in which Halpern’s speaker narrates his *physical* address of the detainee, especially the moments in which the speaker performs sexual acts upon and with the (living) detainee, also constitute a form of apostrophe as defined by Johnson, wherein the corpse is *formally* reanimated through these poetic interactions.

The direct address of the body in *Common Place* demonstrates the ethical uncertainty involved in the deployment of lyric apostrophe. Berlant says of apostrophe as a rhetorical technique, a “lyrical address to the dead—apostrophe—works best when they are absent and you are affectively and mentally in sovereign control over the ways that they are ‘in’ you.”⁵⁵ Johnson’s figuration of apostrophe as an act of rhetorical ventriloquism similarly raises the issue of control. This plays into Halpern’s complicated response to his shame regarding the detainee’s captivity, torture, force-feeding, and suicide in US military custody; in “The Ligature,” the words “wrongness,” “falseness,” “improper,” “punishment,” and “pathetic” all build to simulate how the speaker cannot stop coming up against the immorality of the contemporary moment, in which he implies his own complicity. Whereas literary critic Jonathan Culler posited that “to apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire,” poetics scholar Samuel Ladkin argues that Halpern’s poetry is by contrast characterized by an “openness and vulnerability that seeks to avoid mastering animate objects by will alone.”⁵⁶ I disagree with Ladkin’s take; the corpse certainly seems “bent” into certain

⁵⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 252.

⁵⁶ Sam Ladkin, “The ‘Onanism of Poetry,’” *Angelaki* 20, no. 4 (2015) 131-156, 148.
DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2015.1096638.

positions, situations, and desires of the speaker's in *Common Place*. Yet, the complication that reconciles Ladkin's view of Halpern's project as one of "openness and vulnerability" with my argument that the sexual fantasies in *Common Place* are in fact forceful instances of apostrophe is, again, the speaker's predetermination of his failure and of the impossibility of relation with/re-humanization of the corpse.

Through this poem and the full collection, the reader is faced with the reality of the total degradation of the detainee by the US military and the complicity of the US civilian in that process.⁵⁷ Halpern makes his subject position and the complicity it entails explicit in the poem "Abundance Washed" with the line, "it's impossible to recognize myself except in the figure policing his cell" (129).⁵⁸ In the next sentence, the speaker expresses a reparative aim of the work—"I want to turn love into a miracle play" (129-30)—and gives as an "example" of such a love miracle, a violent series of torturous assaults, quoted earlier, upon the corpse that conclude with the "moment where my lucid mind inhabits his skin" (130). The impossible recognition of the self is jarringly positioned next to a lucid inhabitation of the other, the latter of which is only made possible in the poem by a series of graphic acts of sexual torture that are evocative of but not

⁵⁷ Per Spinks, "Halpern works assiduously to eliminate the geopolitical and social distance between 'here' and 'there' that underwrites these voyeuristic satisfactions by bringing the war back home into the 'nonsite' of our own civic space" (125). In addition to eliminating distance between "here" and "there," Spinks points out Halpern's troubling of a solid dividing line between "us" and "them" via the blurring of boundaries between the speaker and the detainee: "Halpern's seamless transposition of subject positions" within and across poems "consistently underscore[s] 'our' collective responsibility for this new and shadowy phase of the War on Terror" (118). In these elements that Spinks points to as some of the more demonstrably political aspects of Halpern's poetry, *Common Place* simultaneously achieves its designation as lyric art, per noted autonomous art fan Theodor Adorno, who argued in "On Lyric Poetry and Society" that the "substance of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences. Those become a matter of *art* only when they come to participate in something *universal* by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given *aesthetic form*," Adorno's thesis being that the "lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism" and "only by virtue of such interpenetration [of 'thematic' and 'so-called formal' elements] that the lyric poem actually captures the historical moment within its bounds": Theodor Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes on Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 37-54; 38, 46.

⁵⁸ Here, Halpern's poetic identification with a military prison guard at Guantanamo Bay is similar to that of the (civilian) speaker of Sue Halpern's "I am a Vietnam Veteran," the final poem of *Winning Hearts and Minds*.

identical to forms of torture exposed by Wikileaks, the Abu Ghraib photographs, and the CIA “torture report.”

The direct address of apostrophe in *Common Place* is also a site from which we can pinpoint the text eliciting an ambivalent, confused affective response from the reader. A line in “Hoc Est Corpus,” the poem in which Halpern’s speaker begins transcription of the autopsy report, cribbed from “Is the Rectum a Grave?” reads: “To be penetrated is to abdicate every pretense of power” (25). This line makes two things happen in *Common Place*. First, it puts the act of the autopsy and of sexual intercourse into conversation. Second, it sets up a reading of the poetic fantasies to come, in which Halpern’s speaker is sexually penetrated by the detainee, as a willing disruption (abdication) of the power imbalance between the two figures that is acknowledged in the speaker’s recognition of himself as occupying a position of absolute power—and, crucially, *state* power, given that the speaker understands himself as a “policing” figure—over the prisoner-detainee. In a situation in which literal, real-world consent from the detainee is impossible, what does this echo of Bersani ask the reader to think about the power relation between Halpern, who possesses the power to write and publish the fantasy-acts, and the detainee, who cannot represent himself?

While Halpern’s speaker assigns agency to the detainee in every one of the poetic fantasies outside of “Abundance Washed” and “The Ligature,” I have trouble accepting at face value the characterization of even these fantasy scenarios as the poems present them, that is, as consensual and even empowering. In a subsection of “Hocus-Pocus (2),” a few pages after “The Ligature,” Halpern’s speaker narrates:

That’s when I defy the systematic liquidation of his body simply by asking him what he likes. Nuts and melon, fast cars and pretty views, he says as I service him with my tongue, which reveals a bit of the same rectal mucus noted in the report whereby he achieves

identity. Laboring over this glowing wreck, his wasted ass, I taste the hair once cushioning the genitalia, now caught between my teeth and gums. (82)

The first sentence of this block quote seems to argue that a fantasy that bestows either the power to consent or a humanizing series of interests upon the detainee somehow equates to political resistance, insofar as it defies systematic violence. The remainder of the quoted section undercuts such an assertion, however: the detainee's identity is once again reduced to the contents of the autopsy report and the sex is framed as work performed by the speaker with no mention of the detainee's experience of this encounter. The detainee does not respond to the speaker's question with positive consent ("I like how you're touching me" or "I like receiving anilingus"). Where the reader expects the detainee's answer to "what he likes" to concern sexual predilections, given the erotic context established by the preceding poems in the collection, the poem swerves around this expectation, again denying the comfort of closure, even as in this example, the speaker insists that he has created some through his interaction with the detainee.

Regardless of the persuasiveness of Halpern's speaker on the matter of sexual consent, "The Ligature" engenders further discomfiting ambivalence wherein Halpern's speaker first allows himself to be anally penetrated by the detainee and then restages/participates in the immorality he has identified in US military procedure by writing his unequivocal rape and desecration of the corpse, which had already been dispossessed of all privacy by having his body, and particularly his genitals, recorded and manipulated. "So I submit to what I can't master and spread my legs for his dreamy cock," the speaker narrates, and at this point in the fantasy the detainee is a live and active participant (if I can't quite bring myself to use the term "partner"), although the reader is not privy to his thoughts and feelings about the sex he is engaging in (69). Sentences later, the speaker reclaims physical control within the fantasy (having maintained narrative control of the scene all along, of course) and ends the poem,

I hollow out a cunt in his corpse *my opening to the other* and fuck a patient orifice. This is how my love, in order to be love, is enflamed and extinguished in the language of his “unremarkable genitalia.” Addressing the flesh with serial sectioning and still no evidence of trauma, I rub him down with alcohol and ignite the body, tightening the cord upon discharge, making further examination unnecessary. (70)

What does it mean for a now-again-dead corpse to have a “patient” (and feminized) orifice? How to interpret the tension between a politics of attending to the excluded other (of *love* brought into being via poetry) and the callbacks to the autopsy report, “still no evidence of trauma” proving as reprehensibly false in this poetic context as it was shown by the transcriptions in “Hoc Est Corpus” to be coming from the military scribe?

Analyzing the reparative aspect of *Common Place* as a project may help shed some light on what the reader is to make of the end of “The Ligature” and how to understand the events of this sub-poem as a center point of the book. As if heeding the call of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to engage in reparative rather than paranoid reading practices and to turn to weak theories rather than strong ones intent on totalizing mastery, Halpern addresses “his” detainee in order to come into relation with him.

The uncertainty, ambivalence, and discomfort I describe as being manifest both thematically and formally in *Common Place* as well as in the experience of its reader are, I propose, a result of its vacillation between different modes of reparative action. Queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz helpfully delineates three types of reparative action as defined in psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s midcentury writing in “Notes on Schizoid Mechanisms.” Per Muñoz,

One is a kind of manic reparation that carries a sense of triumph, since it essentially flips over the child-parent relationship at the parent’s expense. Another notion of the reparative is a mode of obsessive reparation that can be characterized as compulsive repetition, a sort of placating magical thinking. Finally, there is...a form of reparation that is grounded in love for the object.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006) 675-688, 683. Muñoz quotes Klein on this third type of reparative action: “one moment after we have seen the most sadistic impulses, we meet with performances showing the greatest capacity for love and the wish to make all possible sacrifices to be loved”: Melanie Klein, “The

Formally, Halpern seems to be engaged in the second of Klein's modes of reparative action, the poems' speaker compulsively repeating his fantasy encounters with the detainee only to tear down the theoretical scaffolding of his approach with a confrontation of his complicity in the state violence evinced in the autopsy report and *then* only to convince himself of the efficacy of the project in order to begin the cycle again. Johnson illustrates her claims about the rhetorical function of apostrophe with a close reading of the Gwendolyn Brooks poem "The Mother," arguing that the "speaker's attempt to absolve herself of guilt depends on never forgetting, never breaking the ventriloquism of an apostrophe through which she cannot define her identity otherwise than as the mother eaten alive by the children she has never fed."⁶⁰ It seems to me that something similar may be at play in Halpern's repeated attempts to bring the detainee to life via these sexual fantasies, coupled with the repeated realizations, with each comedown, that this method of attempted relation has always already failed. However, the speaker of the poems, with lines like "this is how my love, in order to be love" would seem to argue that he is performing Klein's third type of reparation, the kind that Muñoz wants to get behind with his theory of "feeling down." Is the fantasy act of burning the corpse a reparative act of love for the detainee (Halpern's object), in that it ends the invasive state gaze of the autopsy, which had heretofore been perpetuated by the Internet dissemination of the report and the transcription practice that marked the beginning of Halpern's own encounter with the body?

That readings of reparation both as compulsive, placating magical thinking *and* as an act of love for the object are locatable in the lyrical addresses of *Common Place* produces an affective confusion. Whereas John Hersey thought his readers would know exactly how to feel about the

Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States, "(1935) in *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press., 1986) 115–45, 126.

⁶⁰ Barbara Johnson 34.

Japanese victims of US nuclear attacks if he described the situation properly in *Hiroshima*, and VVAW directly told people how they as veterans felt in order to induce a specific set of feelings aimed toward antiwar action, Halpern's text by contrast elicits confusion, discomfort, ambivalence, uncertainty—feelings characterized by plurality, the sense that they resist settling and instead involve an anxious fluttering back and forth between opposing feelings.⁶¹ What do these unsettled feelings—a sort of “affective confusion”—afford?⁶²

Excess, Power, and Affective Confusion

Common Place seeks to elicit feeling by any means necessary, by which I mean that the text seems primarily concerned with provoking a (any?) felt response from its reader, even if this means taking up tactics that are shocking, upsetting, offensive, or violent.⁶³ Literary theorist Sianne Ngai sees the “visceral” descriptions in Halpern’s poetry as functioning “precisely by triggering crude and elemental feelings.”⁶⁴ I see the provocation of intense affective response on the part of the reader as a way the poems are trying to answer a question that they themselves pose, quoted earlier but worth repeating: “But if the body’s more than what’s contained by skin, I mean,

⁶¹ Ladkin argues of Halpern’s body of work (notably, leaving out a discussion of *Common Place* amidst his other volumes of poetry), that it “seeks...to maintain ‘weak links,’ where stronger links, stronger codes, too easily become fascistic,” and that Halpern’s “task is to maintain ‘improper’ feeling, feeling not bound by the efficacy expected of social relations, and outside of the logic of ownership (of property)” (136).

⁶² In her call for theoretical complexity in the form of assemblages, Puar cites postcolonial theorist Amit S. Rai, noting that “foregrounding the body as a creative site of indeterminacy promotes ‘affective confusion’ that allows for new affects, and thus new politics, to emerge” (208).

⁶³ Such a tactic is, inevitably, related to the very wartime logic that enables the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” on “enemy combatants”: torture as it has been taken up by the US government as a military tactic in the “war on terror,” is a means of seeking information by any means necessary, Geneva Conventions and US criminal law be damned. Film scholar Hilary Neroni notes that the “basic ideological structure of our times has undergone a revolution when it comes to torture. Regardless of its lack of practical success, the idea of torture has now entered the public imaginary in an unprecedented manner” and “thinking of torture as an effective military tool to uncover hidden clues that will immediately lead to victory is a recent phenomenon”: Hilary Neroni, *The Subject of Torture: Psychoanalysis and Biopolitics in Television and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) 8, 16. DOI: 10.7312/nero17070.

While I am not making the claim that Halpern’s poetic practice, interested in eliciting “feelings by any means necessary,” is akin to literary torture, the text bears both implicit (formal) and explicit (subject-matter) connections to the systematic torture committed by the US government on detainees including the one at the center of Halpern’s poetic meditation.

⁶⁴ Sianne Ngai, “Visceral Abstractions,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015) 33-63, 54.

if there's more to the flesh than what's been ceded by code, *how can we arouse this excess?*" (94, emphasis mine). Excess, typically understood as either a superabundance of something or an overstepping of some boundary, is the key term here. Because of Halpern's emphasis on a process of arousal as a jointly physical and emotional act, I read "excess" in the above quote as Deleuzian pre-cognitive affect, a low hum of sensation already existing in and around one's body but requiring an intermediary to transform into socially legible, expressible feeling. Excess is what makes the body more than the sum of its parts *and* the thing that has the potential to be aroused and brought into a different state of being. Excess is the site of the desire to view the body as a living being, as desirous and socially enmeshed, rather than as mere signifier—coded and contained by skin, an organ that has historically been used as a tool for racialization in the service of dehumanizing certain bodies and producing hierarchies based in flesh.⁶⁵

Obsolete meanings of "excess" include both "extravagant or rapturous feeling" and "extravagant violation of law, decency, or morality."⁶⁶ Elements of both of these dead definitions live on in *Common Place*, as Halpern documents his experiments in developing his own desire for the detainee while traversing, self-consciously and yet repeatedly, past the ethical line laid down by common sense, in terms of queer representation (Halpern is leaning his full weight into various iterations of excess, all of which are already coded as queer, to see where queer coding breaks down), sexual deviancy (via necrophilia fantasies), and the objectification of the dead in a war where "enemy combatants" are obfuscated (inside of black sites and by way of legal definitions). On the one hand, the combination of graphic violence and sexual components in poems such as "The Ligature" show the degree to which Halpern as a poet is engaging in radical vulnerability

⁶⁵ More on "flesh" and the racialized body from Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81.

⁶⁶ "excess, n." OED Online. March 2020. Oxford University Press.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65754?rskey=Yqp64E&result=1> (accessed April 23, 2020).

and radical transgression—whether for the sake of shocking his reader into an aesthetic feeling that is antithetical to the dominant structure of feeling of the present moment or as a means of forging a new and intimate relation between himself and the detainee. The erotic fantasies in the text challenge the reader to confront the traditional representation of non-normative identities as transgressively “excessive” in comparison to the straight white male body that is coded as normative via the heteronormativity, white supremacy, and patriarchy embedded in the dominant ideology of the US.⁶⁷ On the other hand, by enacting poetic fantasies of that eroticize the racialized corpse of a historical figure who died a political prisoner of the US (and, in “The Ligature,” treating said corpse as an object of violence by “ignit[ing] the body”), Halpern cannot avoid reinscribing the power relation at play in the dominant structure of feeling *Common Place* seems overall to want to push back upon.

Who gets to direct the fantasy matters.⁶⁸ As such, Halpern’s white US male identity is significant, a fact he acknowledges in the poems by stating that he cannot help but identify with the prison guard rather than the detainee. Yet this acknowledgement is not followed by any sustained reckoning with the violence of the poetic power imbalance as a problem. Perhaps this silence is Halpern’s way of intimating that there is no amount of reckoning that will balance these scales, that all he can do is write a poem about the impossibility of his poems providing any satisfying resolution to the military violence that killed the detainee. And still, that Halpern writes self-awareness of his affiliation with the detainee’s oppressors into the poems *and* carries on literarily mimicking this oppressive relationship anyway is a source of readerly affective

⁶⁷ While I recognize this line of thought is not unique to the US, the US is my primary concern because it is the cultural context Halpern is writing in and responding to.

⁶⁸ The “*political context of the poem matters*: it matters how much an instance of sentimental abstraction or emotional saturation costs, what labor fuels the shift from the real to the soundtrack reel, and *who’s in control of the meaning* of the shift, the pacing of the shift, and the consequences of detaching, even for a moment, from the consensual mirage”: Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 35 (emphasis added).

hesitation, confusion, and even frustration. This confusion might be parsed into an aesthetic structure of feeling that combines anxious discomfort, desire, and indignance. Ngai characterizes the tendency in Halpern's *Music for Porn* to "repeatedly reenact" in the poems the "covert barring of the [US soldier] combatant's corpse from public view" as meant to "refuse to let us ever forget" that original erasure.⁶⁹ Spinks makes a similar argument about Halpern's mode of intervening in *Disaster Suites* being to double down on rather than to reverse things he identifies as problems.⁷⁰ What imbues this tactic with a significantly different effect in *Common Place* is the singular focus on the detainee as the poems' "degraded material" (to use Spinks's term). Rather than reduce the affective response this creative decision elicits to a simple critique of *Common Place*, we might instead consider the ways in which the gap between the text and the uncomfortable feelings it evokes makes available modes of antiwar reading beyond compassionate sympathy (as in Hersey's *Hiroshima*) and guilty outcry (as in VVAW performance and poetry).

Common Place and/as Antiwar Literature

At several points in the collection, Halpern's speaker shifts back and forth between physical interactions with the detainee (written as if they are physically taking place in the cell at Guantanamo), the speaker's dreams or fantasies (written explicitly as products of his imagination), and more theoretical considerations of the themes of the text (written with a self-reflexive awareness of the poems as already having been written). Halpern's interest in the relation between

⁶⁹ Ngai 45. Introducing a collection of short stories by U.S. veterans of these wars, author Colum McCann writes, "these are the wars that America is so determined not to see that we banned images of soldiers' coffins from our nightly broadcasts, as if the clean lines of a flag-draped coffin would somehow convey the disturbing ugliness of the exercise of military power": Colum McCann "Foreword," Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher, eds., *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013) xi.

⁷⁰ "Unflinchingly aware that there is no route beyond the 'disaster' except back through it in order to make perceptible everything that renders our sense of the commons such an uncommon experience, Halpern's poetic response is to construct a lyric language from all the degraded materials, cancelled longings and blocked attachments which distort our collective image and constitute the familiar void of our war-torn social spaces": Spinks 124.

language and the body (the report, his fantasy-poems, his body, and the detainee's corpse) introduces ways of thinking about the antiwar potential of *Common Place* as a work of literature, whether that takes the form of repairing sexual violence through consensual sexual fantasies of care and intimacy or revealing the systematic dehumanization the US military enacts upon detainees via the poetic treatment of the leaked documents. Additionally, the problematic elements of the poetry create opportunities for thinking about the role of the reader/critic in questioning the politics of the text. In other words, what are the available interpretations for the way that Halpern's critiques of US militarization and capitalism are interspersed with and interrupted by poetic fantasies in which a historical and ongoing power relation of oppression is (at times, it seems, cynically) reinscribed? And how does the affective response that seems to be solicited from the aesthetic experience of reading *Common Place* influence the ways in which it can be understood to work to generate antiwar sentiment?

The *failure* to achieve or maintain a state of relation with the detainee, despite the poems' repetition of fantasies of intimacy, and the sense that achieving a stable state of relation was never going to be possible could be read as a critique of what Sarah Cole calls "war enchantment," the desire to treat death in war as a sacrifice made for the good of the nation as a collective.⁷¹ "Strange structure of my feeling," a line toward the end of *Common Place* reads, "enchanting disenchantment with the hope that I might arouse you too if only by rubbing myself against the poem's conceptual purity, like a horny dog or cat" (128). Halpern is looking for a way to make something communal out of a violent war death (to some degree, with his soldiers' wounds in *Music for Porn* and especially with the detainee corpse of *Common Place*) but not by reiterating

⁷¹ Sarah Cole, "Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature," *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (October 2009) 1632-1647.

the traditional equation where soldier death increases nationalist sentiment.⁷² We might then read the continual failure or devolution into violence of the communal relation between the speaker and the corpse body as Halpern's critique, via poetic praxis, of war enchantment.

Conclusion: Antiwar Reading

Questioning the most transgressive aspects of *Common Place* might allow for thinking against ideologies that enable the US war machine to run in the 21st century that the text also perpetuates, such as the dehumanization of the racialized Other. We can ask, what are the politics of transgression when viewed from the side of the defiled, not the defiler? In an early poem, Halpern asserts, just after wondering "how to feel the thing hovering just beyond effigy without falling to temptation, an opening to my mystified other" that "it's really Flaubert's Julian I want to be, the way he lies full length atop the leper, mouth to mouth, chest to chest, compassion being an act of the whole body" (30). While he wants to be with the detainee as a sexual *partner*, he understands nevertheless that in his own analogy, the detainee occupies the position of the leper as the object of societal rejection. What does this, coupled with the destructive fantasy of "The Ligature," mean for the possibility of a relation of compassion that could negate the power relation at hand? Is such negation ever possible?

An antiwar reading of the aesthetic experience of *Common Place* involves both identifying the ways in which the collection works to contest and repair elements of the hegemonic pro-war structure of feeling *and* pushing back on aspects of the text that reproduce pro-war ideology or ways of feeling. After all, the latter are often invisible, being part of what makes up the titular

⁷² A canonical example of a lyric poem that puts forth this patriotic equation is Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," which opens with the lines: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England": Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier," *Poetry Foundation* (2020). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/13076/the-soldier>.

common place (per the epigraph, “that which we cannot see”⁷³). Antiwar literature functions to make pro-war propaganda visible again. Such making re-visible involves a critical practice philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called “paranoid reading.” Halpern shows himself to be highly suspicious of his own project. His self-reflexive mistrust of the desires driving the poems comes through most biting in the italicized phrases that read as if inserted, Track Changes-style, into several of the prose poems (recall, for example, the line in the postscript stylized as “to sexualize *exploit* the body of a hunger-striking detainee” [160]). Where does *Common Place* neglect to or refrain from calling itself out, and what can we learn from these absences?

One way to think through the implications of such authorial choices is by reading *Common Place* alongside contemporary literary works about the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan written by Arabic or Arab-American authors—specifically, texts that share an interest in the corpse as a central figure in these wars, such as Hasan Blasim’s *The Corpse Exhibition* (2009), Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (2010), or in the poetic form as a vehicle of antiwar sentiment, such as Solmaz Sharif’s *Look* (2016) and Dunya Mikhail’s *The Iraqi Nights* (2013). How do authors who are the objects of exclusionary homonationalist sentiment express their understanding of the same set of events and hegemonic structure of feeling Halpern is responding to in *Common Place*?

A second way of approaching an antiwar reading of the (however inadvertently, ironically, or pessimistically) prowar, problematic tendencies in *Common Place* is to take up a central question of African American studies and related fields: how far do we take reading traumatic

⁷³ The quote is attributed to the poet George Oppen.

material, and when do we look for other ways to heal and learn?⁷⁴ Halpern's obsessive-compulsive transcription of the autopsy report is a confrontation of state violence that he is complicit in at the level of flesh ("profit keeps turning up in my stool"), but the repetitive acting-out of erotic fantasies with/upon the tortured body of the detainee is also a fetishization of the endpoint of that same state violence. Do the poems, then, cross a line into unproductive re-traumatization and melancholia, even as the text refers to its own project as one of mourning? This again calls into question Halpern's relation to productivity, excess, and transgression.

By poetically acting out the racialized sexual violence that is the "common place" of the waging of the US "war on terror," in that this form of violence is at once central to the structure of feeling of this war and willfully pushed out of sight, Halpern joins VVAW in insisting upon his personal culpability. *Common Place* makes plain that no one is apart from or untouched by this violence: either you are subject to it or implicated in its commitment. This has to do, I would argue, with the sheer quantity of records of this violence, even as prime time news coverage of the wars was increasingly sanitized and phased out as years passed. Such records of the violence ranged from the Wikileaks documents that Halpern takes as his source material to YouTube videos uploaded by US soldiers and beheading videos disseminated shortly after the US invasion of Iraq by groups including Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JtJ) and al-Qaeda,⁷⁵ designed for maximal shock value and terror and which were held up in US media as pro-war evidence of the evil and inhumanity of the terrorists. By writing a performative version of himself into sexual scenarios

⁷⁴ African American literature and cultural history scholar Saidiya Hartman asks a version of this question to her fellow scholars in relation to the reproduction of a canonical scene of violence from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: "how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the numbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?": Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 4.

⁷⁵ "Report: Al-Zarqawi Group Kills American Hostage," *CNN* (22 Sept. 2004) <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/09/21/iraq.beheading/>.

with the detainee, Halpern claims to want to reanimate the dead man, to undo the violence that led to his death while in US military custody, but when these scenarios turn violent, they seem to concede the inevitability of the speaker's power becoming a sadistic cudgel, and they seem to formally, through the intrusion of words and phrases in italics, imitate the intrusive thoughts of post-traumatic stress disorder. Thinking about violence even though you do not want to think about it is a classic symptom of combat experience, at least since shellshock in World War I, but PTSD is particularly, with traumatic brain injuries, the banner/premiere/most prevalent injury of US veterans of the "forever wars." If we see an echo of PTSD in Halpern's speaker's relation (in the sense of the way in which he tells or narrates) of his fantasy encounters with the detainee, then we can read *Common Place* as suggesting that the "war on terror" has been both violently committed by all Americans and produced a globalized trauma.

While I would argue that *Common Place* is most invested in showing how any attempt, no matter how sincere or radical or how willing one is to risk oneself in the process, to repair via art the dehumanizing violence of the "war on terror" is ultimately impossible, the form of the failure in these poems nevertheless are instructive. In their collection of failed imaginings, they tell us how not to succeed, which is a way of negatively presenting a possibility for success by doing something otherwise. In the poems, Halpern's speaker repeatedly comes up against the fact that he cannot recognize himself except as the figure policing the detainee's cell. Again and again, his attempts to erotically commune with the detainee, to bring him sexual pleasure in order to enliven him, transform nightmarishly into scenes of sexual violence wherein the speaker and the detainee become sedimented into their roles in the "war on terror." How to refuse or avoid this subjective sedimentation, to explode the imbalance of power that forces the speaker back into his role as the violent perpetrator? Halpern's style of switching focus between the detainee and the speaker, his

“seamless transposition of subject positions” within and across poems, not only points to Americans’ implicatedness in the “war on terror,”⁷⁶ as Spinks argues and as VVAW tried to compel their audience to recognize regarding the American war in Vietnam—it is a way for Halpern to test out such a subjectivity-denaturing poetics. Just like the contact between the speaker and detainee, this denaturing project is ultimately thwarted by the return to and inescapability of the power imbalance between the speaker as a white US male and the detainee as an imprisoned Brown/Arab Yemeni man (in “war on terror” terms: a foreign terrorist or enemy combatant, despite Al Hanashi’s civilian status, recorded in the US government autopsy report, proving the meaninglessness of the “combatant” designation). *Common Place* suggests that this entrenched subjectivity is the thing standing in the way of the success of Halpern and his speakers’ effort to bring about relation between these two people and to undo the detainee’s death and the violence committed by the US military upon his body.

⁷⁶ Spinks 118.

**CHAPTER FOUR: ANTIWAR APOCALYPSE: SPECULATING THE END OF THE
WORLD IN OMAR EL-AKKAD'S *AMERICAN WAR* AND N.K. JEMISIN'S *THE FIFTH
SEASON***

... listen
i've accepted what i was given

be it my name or be it my ender's verdict.
when i was born, i was born a bull's-eye.

i spent my life arguing how i mattered
until it didn't matter.

who knew my haven
would be my coffin?

dead is the safest i've ever been.
i've never been so alive.

“summer, somewhere,” Danez Smith

Prisons and cops survive only in tales for the young
like twin Atlantises or two drowned boogeymen.
A cop's as harmless a Halloween getup as any
Monster, while a prisoner costume's as taboo as a slave one
Now that schools teach what makes them kin.

“After Abolition,” Kyle Carrero Lopez¹

Introduction

Jonathan Schell's anti-nuclear treatise, *The Fate of the Earth*, first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1982 and used the technique of literary speculation to entreat readers to confront the

¹ Danez Smith, “summer, somewhere,” *Don't Call Us Dead* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2017) 11; Kyle Carrero Lopez, “After Abolition,” *The Nation* (6 Oct. 2020) <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/after-abolition/>.

realities of nuclear war. Although he based his writing on scientific data from a 1975 National Academy of Scientists report, Schell wrote speculatively because, while entirely plausible amidst Cold War tensions of the period, nuclear war was impossible to witness due to the simple fact that it was impossible to survive.² In the event of the detonation of a one-megaton bomb (US and USSR arsenals at the time had many thousand times this amount) on New York City, Schell writes,

If it were possible (as it would not be) for someone to stand at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-second Street (about two miles from ground zero) without being instantly killed, he would see the following sequence of events...People in the street would immediately catch fire, and would shortly be reduced to heavily charred corpses...Some buildings might be crushed, as though a giant fist had squeezed them on all sides, and others might be picked up off their foundations and whirled uptown with the other debris. (48)

This speculative description continues for several pages, attempting as John Hersey's report on *Hiroshima* did, to represent nuclear devastation on both summary and intimate scales. The difference I find worth highlighting here between Hersey and Schell's descriptions is temporal in nature: Hersey records and reports on an event that has already happened, while Schell writes an antiwar literature of warning, connecting a current "cold" war with future fiery apocalypse.

This chapter looks to two recent novels that similarly engage with imaginations of the future and yet view the occurrence of an apocalypse from a standpoint different than Schell's. These speculative, apocalyptic novels set in the midst of future wars, *American War* by Omar El Akkad and *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin,³ invite questions such as: what if everyday life is already one of ever-present war (in both the sense of the "forever wars," ongoing if out of sight of the majority of the US population due to both geography and media, and of a domestic policy that endangers certain people in situations considered "civilian")? What would an imagining of the

² "One must conclude that a full-scale nuclear holocaust could lead to the extinction of mankind," Schell writes most directly, forced into the language of "could" by the paradoxical bind wherein he cannot guarantee extinction because it hasn't happened yet, but if it had, no one would be able to record or read of its occurrence: Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (1982; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 93. Elsewhere, Schell notes that the "targeters would run out of targets and victims long before they ran out of bombs" (56).

³ Omar El Akkad, *American War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit Books, 2015). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

future warn of then? And how would an apocalyptic event be characterized from that perspective? What does a future-setting and/or other speculative elements allow a literary text to tell us (as opposed to, for example, the literary journalism of *Hiroshima* or the experimental poetry of *Common Place*)? How do speculative aesthetic projects affect our understanding of war and what it means for something or someone to be antiwar? Can reading an account of *future* war teach us something about preventing wars to come, or how to recognize war as it is happening, or what is at stake when the apocalypse is, as Walter Benjamin put it, pulling the emergency break on the train to stop the ongoing catastrophe of historical progress?⁴

Reading these novels by connecting speculative representations of apocalypse to an abolitionist perspective changes how we think about what it means to be antiwar. I have argued that antiwar literature represents and counters the hegemonic narratives, structures of feeling, and ideologies (the overlaps of which I have demonstrated in previous chapters) that enable the military conflicts the texts want to oppose or critique. This final chapter expands the scope of what makes a work of literature antiwar. Reading *American War* and *The Fifth Season* as antiwar literature allows us to see that critiques of specific military conflicts, even if they lead to the cessation or prevention of the conflicts they are concerned with, will not threaten the US culture of war unless they account for the role war serves for the US state. Some of these roles include: engine of imperialism; necessary profit-maker and -launderer for the capitalist system; institution requiring the lives and labor of US subjects, especially the poor and working class. Without this focus on

⁴ The “true catastrophe is not a break with things as they are; the true catastrophe is, rather, that things go on and on. The progress and continuum of history is history’s catastrophe—whereby the historical and political task becomes one of breaking with this continuum. Benjamin himself writes in some oft-quoted lines about revolution as the moment when you pull the emergency brake on the train of history. Utopia in Benjamin, then, is ultimately intimately and dialectically connected with catastrophe”: Mikkel Krause Frantzen, “No Utopia, Not Now? (Review of Miguel Abensour’s *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin*),” *boundary2* (24 Jan. 2019) <https://www.boundary2.org/2019/01/mikkel-krause-frantzen-no-utopia-not-now-on-miguel-abensours-utopia-from-thomas-more-to-walter-benjamin/>.

war as a tool and a symptom, antiwar arguments may contest the narratives and moods that enable the acceptance of a specific conflict while allowing those in state power to adjust for the vulnerabilities exposed by antiwar movements (an example of this being the replacement of the draft with an all-volunteer military after opposition to the Vietnam War inside and outside the ranks forced significant troop withdrawals).

These novels help us understand that antiwar as a concept must entail a wholesale pursuit of liberation; it must be abolitionist (and, with that, antiracist, antihomophobic, feminist, anti-imperialist, anticapitalist)⁵ and anarchist. Everyday life in the novels is a constant vulnerability to racialized violence and oppression; I argue that this is a lived experience of war, even if in *American War* a peace treaty is signed partway through the narrative and in *The Fifth Season* there is no explicit mention of military conflicts at all. I want to suggest that the apocalyptic logic of *American War* and *The Fifth Season*, wherein each novel's protagonist makes what I am calling an abolitionist decision to end the world rather than allow the current social order to continue unabated, can tell us something about another angle of the antiwar position. When the knee-jerk tendency in scenarios that threaten large populations of people, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or climate change, is to use war metaphors to talk about them, this serves not only to shore up nationalist sentiment but also to cover over the uneven distribution of the suffering that arises out of these situations. COVID-19 is not, despite the ubiquity of the phrase, the "great equalizer." In fact, as of August 2020, per the CDC, African Americans died at twice the rate of their white counterparts.⁶ Perhaps, in helping to expose the unevenness of death and violence on a national

⁵ "Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition": Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press: New York, 2003) 108.

⁶ "COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity," *CDC Website*. Last updated 18 Aug. 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>. Unsurprisingly, "White, Non-Hispanic Persons" served as the neutral category based around which the entire data table was organized.

(and, in *The Fifth Season*, planetary) scale, speculative antiwar literature signals the dangers of such a pro-war (or war-happy) discourse. On the other hand, this speculative genre of antiwar literature may also be uniquely positioned to demonstrate the ways in which, at the level of violence, the response of those in positions of structural power—government leadership, corporate heavyweights, and the like—to global crises such as COVID-19 and the “sixth extinction” are akin to warfare, weaponizing the same othering forces of patriarchy, white supremacy, and xenophobia that powered the propaganda campaign John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* sought to disrupt.

The theoretical formations of the environmental quality of antiblack racism by Christina Sharpe and of Blackness, social life, social death by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney help me to think about how racism and war are imbricated and how white supremacist ideology determines what is socially legible as violence and war. For example, Sharpe delineates the way in which those with the power to sanction antiblack violence produce a narrative around it: the “injury will then be seen to slip from the conditions of slavery, colonialism, segregation, lynching, touristic display, ethnographic display, incarceration, vigilantism, gentrification, ‘immigrant camps and detention centers,’ and state murder, to social and other ‘scientific claims’ about blackness, and Black being, itself”⁷ That is to say, the “injury” of Blackness is made to appear inherent rather than caused by structural oppression. Along with this repositioning of the “injury” of Blackness is a refocusing of what counts as violence and terror. Sharpe quotes Darren Wilson’s grand jury testimony to show how Wilson’s account of his murder of Michael Brown “evacuates *his* role as ‘strong arm’ of the law and state power falls away as the armed and trained cop is transformed by his proximity to blackness into a five-year-old child.” Wilson, as the mouthpiece of state power and white masculinity, characterizes Michael Brown as hulking, bestial, and monstrous. Wilson

⁷Sharpe, *In the Wake* 44.

attributes the capacity for deadly violence and terror to Brown and makes the case that the act for which he is on trial should not count as terroristic violence. In another situation that demonstrates the way in which the dominant narrative seems to be that state violence does not count as violence, Chambers-Leston analyzes the now-iconic 2016 photograph of a Black Lives Matter protestor standing before a line of militarized police in Baton Rouge. The photographer is quoted as saying that the scene “wasn’t very violent” because the protestor had silently acceded to her arrest. Chambers-Leston corrects the record: “But it was violent, she was saying something, she was resisting. A black woman does not stand on a highway to face down a battalion of heavily armed white police officers in either silence or acquiescence. Her body is the utterance and it sounds a collective ‘no.’”⁸ I find compelling Sharpe and Chambers-Leston’s readings of the ways in which racism makes state violence (and in Chambers-Leston’s example, resistance to it) illegible because they enable me to think about the unevenness of violence, particularly in terms of what types of violence are defined as war.

Each novel also has a theory of the connection between racism and war in the US, and of the degree to which both produce the current social order. In this way, they are part of a literary tradition that characterizes state violence in the US as akin to an occupying army at war with its own people.⁹ I argue that by developing a desire for apocalypse in their protagonists that is formally evoked through speculation, giving the reader the feeling of what an end to the current social order might be like, these novels demonstrate the necessity of revolution at a categorical

⁸ Chambers-Leston, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018) 4.

⁹ Du Bois, although writing in support of Black Americans fighting in World War I, saw the struggle against antiblack racism in the US as an equally necessary, more intense war to be fought: “By the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

We return from fighting.

We return fighting”: W.E.B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* XVIII (May 1919) 13.

level,¹⁰ of the abolition of state and capital, to being antiwar. Angela Y. Davis and Mariame Kaba's definitions of abolition help me to read the novels in this way. Both Davis and Kaba are activist-scholars whose decades of ongoing work on abolition is focused in opposition to the prison-industrial complex and draws from the anti-slavery abolition struggles and writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and others.¹¹ If the question we are asking while reading *The Fifth Season*, whether or not we locate it in physical connection, no matter how temporally distant, with our present here on Earth, is "what other systems and societies are possible?" then Jemisin's novel (and the trilogy it begins) align closely with Kaba's conceptualization of prison abolition as a project focused primarily on imagining the future: a world *after* prisons and policing. The first sentence of *The Fifth Season* introduces the "end of the world," only in order to, in the next sentence, "get onto more interesting things" (Jemisin 1). In a Yom Kippur lecture titled "We Keep Us Safe: PIC Abolition and Transformative Justice," Kaba referenced Dawna Markova's description of imagining the future as a "collective story waiting for our voices to express."¹² The emphasis on situating one's focus (and with it, one's energy, time, labor, and organizing power) in a future that is possible rather

¹⁰ In a 2014 radio interview, theorist of Afropessimism Frank B. Wilderson III said that just as a Marxist analysis seeks the destruction of the "capitalist as a category," an analysis of antiblackness finds necessary the destruction of the category of the human. Wilderson summed up his view of the project of Afropessimism as: "What are we trying to do? We're trying to destroy the world": Frank B. Wilderson III, interview by Jared Ball, Todd Steven Burroughs and Dr. Hate, "'We're Trying to Destroy the World': Anti-Blackness and Police Violence After Ferguson," M. Gržinić, A. Stojnić (eds.), *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance* (2014; Palmgrave MacMillan: Camden, UK, 2018) 45-59, 57. Elsewhere Wilderson has written, the "way out is a kind of violence so magnificent and so comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries. So, in other words, the trajectory of violence that Black slave revolts suggest, whether it be in the 21st century or the 19th century, is a violence against the generic categories of life, agency being one of them": Frank B. Wilderson, "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation," interview by C.S. Soong, *KPFA Radio* (Berkeley, CA, 4 Mar. 2005), reprinted in Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, Jared Sexton, Hortense J. Spillers, and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017) 15-30, 30. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78343-7_3

¹¹ Angela Davis credits scholar-activist Mike Davis as first using the term "prison-industrial complex": Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Frank Barat, ed. (New York: Haymarket Books, 2016) 24. See also Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) especially 84-104.

¹² Miriam Kaba, "We Keep Us Safe: PIC Abolition and Transformative Justice," *Tzedek Chicago* (28 September 2020).

than a present that is to be destroyed is a shift from the way I characterize an abolitionist position in my reading of *American War*, which is more focused on the necessity of abolishing the current system than imagining a new one. Together, the two novels theorize destruction and rebuilding as two sides of an antiwar abolitionist coin.

Although the novels are set in the future, they implicitly refer to historical occurrences and both encourage and reward reading with an eye to historical context. The tension surrounding a distinction between future and past/present is important for my argument in this chapter because I want to make the case that the future setting—and its detachment from representation or plausible simulation of historical events—affects the way in which an antiwar critique can be made¹³ and the feeling(s) that contribute to and accompany this contestation. The perspective-altering potential of stories set in the future is well-trod territory for science fiction scholars, with extrapolation and speculation being two modes of imagining future possibilities. I think with theories of speculation by scholars including Steven Shaviro, Fredric Jameson, Aimee Bahng, Kara Keeling, and Tavia Nyong'o in order to first analyze the ways *American War* and *The Fifth Season* make use of the speculative as a formal technique and then identify the antiwar critique made possible by speculation in each novel (that critique being that an end to war requires an end to the current social order).

I read the novels as engaging in and emblematic of these two modes: *American War* as making use of literary extrapolation and *The Fifth Season* as engaging in a more purely speculative form of imagination-through-narrative. My distinction between extrapolation and speculation is

¹³ In his study of science fiction and utopianism, Fredric Jameson references Jürgen Habermas to write of the future “as *disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present, and as a radical and systemic break with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present”: Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 228.

not a hierarchical one but rather one of emphasis. If extrapolation as a project is more interested in inevitability, speculation is one of possibility.¹⁴ As Brooks Landon summarizes in his entry on “Extrapolation and Speculation” in the *Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, extrapolation means exploring an existing trend, or something that is plausible based on current conditions in the real world, while speculation asks “what if?” and is more interested in possibility than probability. For Shaviro, the notoriously slippery terms exist in the following relation to one another: “speculation picks up just at the point where extrapolation falters and fails. If extrapolation follows a social or technological trend ‘to the limits of its potential,’ then speculation seeks to imagine what happens when a trend *exceeds* its potential, and pushes against or beyond its own limits.”¹⁵ As to how a critical engagement with the present from the future is formulated so as to *move* its readers, Shaviro, following philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, tells us that speculation involves a proposition that is false but nevertheless stimulates thought, both rationally and affectively inviting the potential for change. Whitehead calls the special ingredient of speculation a “lure for feeling,”¹⁶ and per Shaviro, “without the speculative lure of false properties, we might never be moved to change anything.”¹⁷ By soliciting the reader into a world wholly other than their own, speculative texts force an engagement with a different surrounding.¹⁸ The affective space conjured out of this difference in temporal surrounding allows the reader to then unpack the story and its critique from a distanced (yet, in the case of extrapolation, proximate) position.

¹⁴ Speculation, which is sometimes used as an umbrella term encapsulating extrapolation, has become a key term in recent humanities scholarship: from Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby’s 2013 book *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* to Aimee Bahng’s 2017 monograph *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* and Mark Rifkin’s 2019 work *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation*.

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, “Defining Speculation: Speculative Fiction, Speculative Philosophy, and Speculative Finance,” *Alienocene: Journal of the First Outernational* (23 Dec. 2019) 1. <https://alienocene.com/2019/12/23/defining-speculation/>

¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978) 85.

¹⁷ Shaviro 2.

¹⁸ This is not unlike Shaviro’s understanding of the aesthetic and Jonathan Flatley’s reading of literary texts as affective maps producing “self-estrangement,” drawing us outside of ourselves: *Affective Mapping* 80.

Speculative texts both create a new “then and there” for the reader to imaginatively occupy and defamiliarize the “world” as it is (or as it is generally understood via ideological formation).¹⁹ These dual functions might lead us to ask: what do we mean when we think about the “world”?²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical text *Being Singular Plural* is prefaced with the notion that the “situation of the earth and humans” might most pressingly be represented by a list of proper names beginning with, at the time of its publication in 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina and trailing off (for it could never come to a definitive end) at “Iraq, Islamic Front Salvation, Shining Path, Vaulx-en-Velins, Neuhof.”²¹ Nancy’s “world” as disappointingly incomplete yet seemingly-infinite list of unending human conflict is, I think, aligned with the way *American War* and *The Fifth Season* conceptualize the “world.”

American War is set in the United States in the year 2074; a Second Civil War is underway, ostensibly triggered by the refusal of the South to fully transition away from dependency on fossil fuels as an energy source. *The Fifth Season* isn’t explicitly set on planet Earth as we know it, but some lore that lives on in the present moment of the novel suggests that the world of the novel is, plausibly, our world, made unrecognizable by thousands of years of climate change. Modern technologies of industrialization are alluded to in the recollections of “legend” in passages such as the following: “People began to do horrible things to Father Earth. They poisoned waters beyond

¹⁹ Speculative texts are in this way queer: “We can feel [queerness] as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality...The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*”: José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

²⁰ Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018), a contemporary of *American War* and *The Fifth Season*, reminds readers that the world is inhabited by more than humans and has been for an overwhelming majority of its history as a life-sustaining planet: Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

²¹ Nancy xvii. “This is the ‘earth’ we are supposed to ‘inhabit’ today,” Nancy continues, the “earth for which the name Sarajevo will become the martyr-name, the testimonial-name: this is us, we who are supposed to say *we* as if we know what we are saying and *who* we are talking about. This earth is anything but a sharing of humanity. It is a world that does not even manage to constitute a world” (xiii).

even his ability to cleanse, and killed much of the other life that lived on his surface. They drilled through the crust of his skin, past the blood of his mantle, to get at the sweet marrow of his bones” (Jemisin 379-80).²² Jemisin’s novel describes a world where certain people are hunted down by state and civilian actors alike if they attempt to live on their own terms, and once captured, they have the “choice” between slavery and death. The book then shows that it is “not crazy at all” for a main character, Alabaster, to trigger an apocalyptic event (Jemisin 449). I read both novels as theorizing the human cause of climate change and mass extinction, racism, and state-sanctioned violence and terror via the literary genre of speculation.

In addition to the speculative future setting, these novels share another important generic affordance; both novels follow their respective protagonists, who are Black queer women, throughout almost their entire lifespans, encouraging readers to develop a sense of understanding, if not empathy, with their experiences of and responses to state violence. That is, the reader shares in El Akkad and Jemisin’s protagonists’ experiences as oppressed yet resisting subjects throughout the process of reading the novel(s). Read in this way, the novels engage in a turn to experience that is reminiscent of a well-known paradox of war and witness literature: on the one hand, the narrator/author asserts that it is impossible for the reader to understand what they have suffered, while on the other hand, the text is written in large part to try to show the reader how it felt to go through said experience. If understanding war experience is assumed to lead to an antiwar stance, then trying to get the reader to simulate having the experience is an antiwar move. While this assumption provides much of the foundation upon which war narratives often operate and are

²² In fact, Jemisin has taken to social media to dispel the idea that she envisioned the world of the novel as “our” Earth: “Once again, since I keep getting asked: the Broken Earth series' setting was not intended to be our Earth in the future. I take it that's a commonality of the 'dying Earth' subgenre? But I've never read any of those, sorry, so IDK” (Twitter, 20 October 2020). This tweet was followed by one acknowledging the separation of the novel from her authorial intent and the role of the reader in interpreting the link between our present reality and the trilogy’s setting: “That said, I've been trying to tell folks it's not our Earth for 5 years now, and I've kind of given up bc nobody believes me, lol. So it's our Earth if you want it to be. It works either way, idc” (20 October 2020).

understood, it is, of course, not always borne out in reality. A problem for antiwar literature, then, is: what if readers refuse to care? I am interested in thinking about ways in which the objects of study of this chapter anticipate and comment upon this problem. To do so, I read the novels' treatment of their protagonists alongside theoretical texts that similarly center Black women in discussions of literary and historical violence by Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman.²³

Jemisin's novel is somehow hopeful while foregrounding a future in which the world and human civilization as we know it is ending continuously, and I read such hope as an antiwar feeling that combines elements of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism,²⁴ with the aid of theoretical considerations of hope from the writing of queer-of-color theorists Keeling, Nyong'o, José Esteban Muñoz, and Joshua Chambers-Leston. These scholars engage hopefully with speculative and future-oriented artworks out of a belief in the powers of the false that Nyong'o and film theorist Kara Keeling explicitly trace back to the writings of Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, if something that is by all factual or historical accounts *false* nevertheless has the ability to alter reality, then falsification is a means by which art can change the world. Crucially, the organizing principle that drives Nyong'o, Keeling, Muñoz, and Chambers-Leston to art that is speculative/future-oriented is racialization (Blackness for Nyong'o and Keeling; Brownness, ultimately, for Muñoz; and minoritarian marginalization for Chambers-Leston). The dominant Western narrative of liberal

²³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁴ Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, of which *The Fifth Season* is the first installment, can be categorized as works of Afrofuturism, a term first used by Mark Dery in "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994) 179–222. See also: Mark Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (2007) 177-86. For Afropessimism, see Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, Jared Sexton, Hortense J. Spillers, and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017). Jared Sexton's work brings Afropessimism, Black optimism, and Black feminism into conversation helpfully in both "The Social Life of Social Death," *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011) 1-47 and "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral* 1 (2012) n.p.

individualism assumes autopoiesis—that we can bring ourselves into being—but the subaltern is foreclosed from this ability and instead must function as the Other against which the “we” is defined.²⁵ So, following Nyong’o and Keeling, along with many other prominent thinkers in Black Studies, notably poet-scholar Fred Moten, if you lack access to autopoiesis but need to project a people to come or a world that you could imagine wanting to be a part of—because the current world is untenable—the only place to turn to is improvisation.²⁶ *The Fifth Season*, as a work of speculative fiction, performs such improvisation of a world that is removed from human history as we understand the phrase. I argue that the novel also puts forth a claim about the limits of improvisation as an enduringly feasible or desirable survival strategy.

Extrapolation, the Refugee-Terrorist-Revolutionary, and *American War* in the Anthropocene

American War by Omar El Akkad is set in the future, and this is what allows it to reflect in the particular way that it does on the present and past of US militarism. It implicitly refers to historical occurrences and both encourages and rewards reading with an eye to historical context. I want to make the case that the future setting of *American War*, through which a relation to historical *events* is constructed out of a detachment from representations that are concerned with historical accuracy, affects the way in which the novel elicits antiwar sentiment. More specifically, the plotting of the novel plays with the dominant historical narrative by extrapolating potential near-future events that are clearly parallels to actual past and present/ongoing events: an example I will discuss in more detail later in this section finds the protagonist detained and tortured in an explicit echo of the indefinite detention of “enemy combatants” by US military at Guantanamo Bay prison. What does the futuristic aspect of this novel teach us if we are to think of it as an

²⁵ For Wilderson, this takes the form of a slave/human binary, wherein “Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves”: “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation” 19.

²⁶ Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123.5 (Oct. 2008) 1743-1747.

antiwar text? And more broadly, how do aesthetic projects that imagine the future affect our understanding of war and our understanding of what it means for something or someone to take an antiwar position?

The future-setting of *American War* provides a vantagepoint from which the reader can engage critically with the present moment retrospectively (in other words: once I enter imaginatively into the future of the novel, the year 2021 is, from this perspective, in the past). In what follows, I want to position *American War* as an extrapolative text that draws from present events and in which torture as a plot point becomes the hinge point that demands that we as readers stretch our imaginations to capacity and perhaps into the realm of speculation. Shaviro's claim that speculation stimulates thoughts and affective reactions based on the depiction of something that is false applies, I would argue, to extrapolation more specifically, as well, because extrapolation is concerned with things that are "false" in the sense that they haven't happened yet, and nothing in the future is guaranteed absolutely. The premise of *American War* extrapolates impacts—both physical and political—of climate change in the present moment of the novel (2017), fast-forwarding to 2074 to imagine Florida underwater (due to rising sea levels) and a Second Civil War in progress between the fossil fuel-eschewing North and the Free Southern State that refuses to give them up. *American War* combines familiar touchstone features of the war on terror and the US history of antiblack racism so that the future-set dystopia reads like an alternative history. Through these extrapolations, *American War* offers an expansive understanding of militarism and reframes dominant conceptions of terrorism, forced migration, and violence. The perspective *American War* encourages the reader to recognize is in the same vein as the argument espoused by Michelle Alexander, Patrick Deer, and others, which is that increasing domestic militarization in

the US (in the bulking up of police force weaponry, for example) is explicitly linked to militaristic foreign policy.²⁷

El Akkad peppers his future-set debut novel with historical details based on his work as a journalist, key instances of his reporting being on Guantanamo Bay in 2008 and Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. What do we get when we examine a book that situates itself as an extrapolative text by sourcing factual information directly from the author's journalistic writings? By situating the reader in a future tense, speculative fictions provide the opportunity for gaining a perspective on the present that is not available otherwise.²⁸ Thus, the future-set novel functions as contemporary non-fiction and even realist fictional accounts of the US military cannot. However, El Akkad's professional experience grounds the depictions of the many forms of oppression *American War's* protagonist, Sarat Chestnut, experiences throughout the novel, which covers her life from age 6 on. Sarat's story is bookended by the brief retrospectives of her surviving nephew, who is presenting her story after her death. The narration of Sarat's experiences are intermittently interspersed with government documents, redacted archival materials, speech transcripts, and media clippings that give the reader a sense of the hegemonic narrative of the world of the novel—an "official story" that clashes jarringly with what readers are encountering through Sarat's experiences—and how this world is constructed and maintained. El Akkad leverages both his professional experience as a journalist and the liberties offered by the form of the novel set in the

²⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010); Patrick Deer, "Mapping Contemporary American War Culture," *College Literature* 43.1 (2016): 48-90.

Another literary text that makes this point implicitly is Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, when, in a passage containing a memory of the protagonist's grandmother pleading for her life while held at gunpoint at a US Army checkpoint in Saigon during the American war in Vietnam, the context shifts to #BlackLivesMatter protests: "Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. Don't shoot. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. No bang.": Ocean Vuon, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019) 43, original emphasis.

²⁸ Shaviro writes that "in relation to which [the futurity of speculative fiction] our own present moment can only be viewed retrospectively" (5).

future is what makes this literary text such an effective work of extrapolation, in my view. So, what specifically does extrapolation in *American War* make possible?

The tension between familiarity and the distancing of defamiliarization that occurs due to the setting of *American War* in the US of 2074 (a solidly future, and thus unknowable, moment that is nevertheless close enough to not be unthinkable, made more relatable by the relative stability of the geography) allows readers to recognize the overlap of state-sponsored terror wielded systematically at Black and Brown Americans and the racialized Other of the “war on terror.” Sarat’s cumulative life experiences enable contemporary readers to conceive of the centuries-long history of imperialism and chattel slavery in the US—global and local trajectories of terror and violence—in a single individual’s short lifespan. Sarat is a queer Black (Afrolatinx) American woman *and* an anti-American terrorist (insofar as, by the time Sarat becomes an adult, she is a prized sniper for the Southern rebels, who have officially lost the Second Civil War and slipped into a mode of guerrilla warfare). As a child, her family was forced to relocate to a refugee camp called Patience after her father was killed when a government building was bombed. Sarat’s forced migration and her blackness bring to mind Toni Morrison’s assertion that the “overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery. The consequences of which transfer have determined all the wars following it as well as the current ones being waged on every continent.”²⁹ El Akkad’s coverage of militaristic crackdowns on the residents of Ferguson following the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 brings the present-day state violence against Black Americans (and its connection to imperialistic US military activity in the Middle

²⁹ Toni Morrison, “Home,” *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, eds. Wahneema Lubiano and Arnold Rampersad (New York: Pantheon: 1997) 10. Quoted in Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) 3.

East) front and center in an August 2014 article titled “Rifles, tear gas, riots: Ferguson is the American Spring.”³⁰ Without even scratching the surface of the racist impact of the systematic militarization of police in the era of mass incarceration, we could point to the 1985 police bombing of MOVE in residential Philadelphia and the deployment of the National Guard to Detroit in the summer of 1967 as examples that prove the point of the founders of the Movement for Black Lives that Ferguson was “not an aberration, but in fact, a clear point of reference for what was happening to Black communities everywhere.”³¹ Both El Akkad’s journalism and *American War* formally suggest that the US treats its Black subjects as enemies of war.

American War furthers its apocalyptic conception of how to be antiwar by staging connections to and between these broader oppressive structures of US foreign and domestic policy, which *then* primes the reader to recognize the conditions that make Sarat’s final decision to release an apocalyptic plague on her fellow Americans inevitable. In sum, I argue that literary extrapolation as a formal technique offers a smoother onramp for readers of *American War* to engage with the unceasing violence of US history that leads thinkers such as Frank B. Wilderson to conclude that the only viable resistance movement would be one aimed at life (in the social structures) as we know it.³² As Wilderson has said, “Most Americans, most people in the world,

³⁰ Omar El Akkad, “Rifles, tear gas, riots: Ferguson is the American Spring,” *The Globe and Mail* (19 August 2014) <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/world-insider/rifles-tear-gas-riots-ferguson-is-the-american-spring/article20106569/>

³¹ “Herstory,” *Black Lives Matter*. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

³² With regard to *American War*’s readership, I would add that while the novel was not explicitly marketed to a Young Adult audience, Michiko Kakatuni opened her New York Times review by characterizing *American War* as containing “plot elements familiar to readers of the recent young-adult dystopian series ‘The Hunger Games’ and ‘Divergent.’”: Kakatuni, “A Haunting Debut Looks Forward to a Second American Civil War,” *New York Times* (27 Mar 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/books/review-american-war-omar-el-akkad.html>. El Akkad makes use of the emerging trend in YA speculative dystopias in order to re-politicize them; where the action in *The Hunger Games* makes serious political statements about imperialism, violence, and social media/reality television, among other things, the trilogy maintains narrative distance from US or other imperial nations, *American War* takes its narrative to a barely-concealed Guantanamo Bay, pulling no punches in its critique of US militarism, racism, homonationalism, and so on.

are not willing to engage in a paradigm of oppression that does not offer some type of way out. But that is what we live with as Black people every day.”³³

American War is in this way a powerful statement on US racialization because through the figure of Sarat, the detention of migrants and “enemy combatants” and the everyday terrorization of Black Americans are folded into each other. *American War*, as a function of literary form, collapses blackness and the Muslim terrorist (as characterized in the discourse of the “war on terror”) and invites the reader to think fluidly about the entanglements of militarism and racism in US history. Critical work by Wilderson, Sharpe, and Hartman the everyday terrors of blackness, systemic terror, and annihilation as facts of existence. Thinking about *American War* through the lens of antiblack racism in the US reveals that Sarat’s seemingly extreme desire to end the world is emphatically *not* extreme on the part of someone for whom existence in the world as it is equals constant vulnerability to total violence and can be considered an instantiation of antiwar sentiment.

Violence is fused to the concept of war; Elaine Scarry defined war in her landmark 1985 monograph *The Body in Pain* as a competition to “out-injure” one’s opponent.³⁴ What does *American War* say about violence and its role in war and resistance to war by foregrounding the violence Sarat and her family suffers at the hands of various state actors *and* the connection between this state violence and the violence Sarat commits, which can be defined as terroristic and revolutionary? How does the way in which the novel encourages its reader to imaginatively experience the Chestnut family’s assimilation as refugees of Camp Patience, where everyday suffering is brought to a dramatic halt by a military massacre; of Sarat’s years of torture and detention at Sugarloaf Detention Facility; and of her willful participation in murderous violence

³³ Wilderson, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” see Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, Jared Sexton, Hortense J. Spillers, and Wilderson, *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017) 22.

³⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 63-64, 126.

by sniping a Northern general, hunting down her torturer, and finally releasing a biological weapon insist that we reexamine preconceived notions about violence as oppressive or empowering, necessary as opposed to excessive or needless?

American War reframes the hegemonic US narrative that makes attacks on uniformed representatives of the nation-state (soldiers, police) and property damage, for instance, hyper-visible as violent incidents while rendering much less visibly violent the forced relocation of huge quantities of the global population, mass species extinction, and “enhanced interrogation,” to name a few.³⁵ Mass forced migrancy and species extinction are two examples of what Rob Nixon has called “slow violence,” “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”³⁶ *American War* therefore reframes the thinking of readers inculcated by this dominant narrative in terms of what counts as violence and how, for whom, and by whom it is sanctioned. Those who are, in our present moment and at the time of its publication in 2017, dying or else having their lives otherwise destroyed by climate change, post-9/11 wars and the resulting refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe, and police and military practices of racial profiling are primarily poor, primarily living in the Global South, primarily Black and indigenous people of color. These forms of violence have not had the same impact on the everyday lives of those in wealthier, whiter parts of the world (including great swaths of the racially and economically segregated US), allowing those less-impacted the privilege to look away. The novel

³⁵ “As their land fails them, hundreds of millions of people from Central America to Sudan to the Mekong Delta will be forced to choose between flight or death. The result will almost certainly be the greatest wave of global migration the world has seen”: Abraham Lustgarten, “Where Will Everyone Go?” *ProPublica* and *New York Times Magazine* (23 July 2020) <https://features.propublica.org/climate-migration/model-how-climate-refugees-move-across-continents/>. Additionally, the US Refugee Agency reports over six million refugees and asylum seekers displaced by post-9/11 military unrest across Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya.

³⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 2.

shows that from Sarat's structurally oppressed perspective, and particularly her perspective as a Black queer woman,³⁷ violent terror constitutes the very environment in which she lives. This environmental quality of racial terror (the ever-present threat of and vulnerability to violence) is Sharpe's "weather" of antiblackness: "In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate."³⁸ The refusal to characterize state violence *as* violence reaches back from the present moment to the erasure from the history of the US of its founding via violent dispossession, genocide, and enslavement.

Sarat is an American-born citizen, who was orphaned and displaced by a civil war. Under the logic of American exceptionalism wherein having US citizenship protects you from certain things and, on the flipside, is a legitimate reason to treat people who are not US citizens as less-than, her later detainment and torture by her own government would seem to merit shocked outrage. Instead the novel exposes the bad-faith underbelly of this logic, which unevenly yet systemically distributes violence across populations and, in doing so, preserves a number of societal norms and government policies. When the repatriation specialist from the Peace Office characterizes Sarat's experiences as unfortunate exceptions, indications that a well-intentioned system had malfunctioned through no fault of the government, the reader recognizes that reform is impossible and plays into the hegemonic narrative. Of Sarat's detention and torture, the repatriation specialist says: the "government of the United States, in capturing and temporarily detaining you as a suspected insurrectionist, was acting in good faith on information from a source the government now believes was not credible" (El Akkad 258). Sarat's treatment, while perhaps still shocking and outrageous, is the system working smoothly; in this way, if the novel invites a

³⁷ In Wilderson's theorization, the Black subject occupies the position of the Slave against which the category of the Human is made possible through violence. "Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves": "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation" 19.

³⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake* 106.

sense of outrage or injustice, it is more attuned to an abolitionist position, an advocacy for tearing down the current system, which is based in war, whole cloth.

A single chapter of *American War* covers the period of Sarat's life as a detainee in Sugarloaf, a detention center in the Florida Sea. It is impossible for a reader who has not been indefinitely detained and tortured in a military prison to *literally* understand what it feels like to be tortured over a duration of years as Sarat is, and so El Akkad embarks on an imaginative project at this point in the novel in order to invite the reader to try to think what it would be like to be a Sugarloaf detainee. Over fifteen pages, the reader is immersed in Sarat's six-year detention, complete with the physical and emotional sensations produced by solitary confinement, torture by sensory overload and waterboarding, force-feeding and starvation. The remainder of the novel forces the reader to stay inside of Sarat's trauma by consistently calling attention to the lasting damage detainment has wrought on her body and mind.

But, importantly, even as El Akkad has to do speculative work to write the chapter from Sarat's perspective with omniscient access to her thoughts, feelings, and pain, it is not a totally imaginative act because there are people who look like and have names like him who have experienced this torture (and the proximity to it through the impact to their communities and their constant vulnerability to it). Black, Latinx, and Arabic people live in the daily reality of a 21st century US environment where torture and detention are experienced not as impossibilities but as threatened inevitabilities. Whiteness is what makes these fates seem impossible to some but not all readers. Sharpe, Hartman, and Wilderson theorize from this position of proximity to racialized terror. And the descriptions of the torture Sarat undergoes are themselves lifted, full cloth, from El Akkad's journalistic coverage: Guantanamo Bay in 2008 is transformed into Sugarloaf in 2086. For example, Sarat's detainment in Camp Saturday, the place where she resides when she is not in

“visitations”—the Northern euphemism for torture-based interrogations—includes the same surveillance, narrated with more attention to Sarat’s experience of it: “Every three minutes, the slit in Sarat’s cell door would open, and a pair of eyes would inspect the room, and then the slit would close again. In time the sound of metal slits opening and closing all along the corridor became a kind of metronome, against which Sarat measured the dawn and death of the day. Eventually she came to know the peering eyes by heart, and gave their owners names of her own invention.” (251).

Having discussed the way that Sarat as a protagonist functions as the guide for the reader to orient their perspective in and affective response to the future world of the novel, I would like to tie this aspect of the novel back to our discussion of literary extrapolation. If extrapolation is tied to the concept of inevitability—think about an extrapolative text as asking “what will happen?” as opposed to a speculative text asking “what happens if (fill in the blank)?”—then *American War* asserts that if American empire continues on this path, it *will* produce a subject who would rather kill everybody than work within the logic of fraternity, brotherhood, and liberty of the American liberal ideal or the logic of “us vs. them” that is so often the language of war. When asked whether her bioweapon would “be enough to kill all of them—the Blues, the Southern traitors, the whole lot of ‘em?” Sarat responds, “Everyone,” rejecting the idea that her suicidal attack will render her a “hero” and martyr to the “Southern cause” with the rejoinder: “Fuck the South and everything it stands for” (El Akkad 313). She is no longer acting out of a revolutionary loyalty to the Free Southern State but instead aims at the heart of the US political system and those who keep it in power and benefit from not challenging it.

The “us vs. them” configuration that Sarat opts out of by the end of *American War* also functions to prop up the concept of terrorism. At one point in the novel, in response to a former

comrade who characterizes his captors by saying “They’re not my people...They’re terrorists” Sarat says, à la Nina Simone, “Terrorists, goddamn...That word will work on anybody, won’t it?” (El Akkad 231). What does the novel teach us that being a terrorist means? Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai take a Foucauldian perspective on the monstrous element of the figure of the terrorist post-9/11, where the monster is an undisciplined body that, in its resistance to a disciplinary regime, to quote Foucault, “combines the impossible and the forbidden.”³⁹ Per Puar and Rai, the “monsters that haunt the prose of contemporary counterterrorism emerge out of figures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have always been racialized, classed, and sexualized.”⁴⁰ Sarat becomes identified as a terrorist, in this sense, before she has committed any acts of violence or treason, but instead in the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it line forty pages into the novel when her skin color is revealed—“Of the three children, she had the darkest skin; Dana and Simon had inherited the brown of their father, Sarat the black of her mother” (El Akkad 40), which could be read as a nod to the slavery-era doctrine “Post sequitur ventrem.” Or perhaps she was first classified as a terrorist when she encountered the possibility that she could fight in the war by learning that “there were...some women who fought and killed, disguised themselves in the clothing of men if they had to. Women who defied” (El Akkad 136).

This brings me to linger on Sarat’s desire, at the culmination of the novel, to end not only her life but the world as the US of the novel knows it. Sarat achieves her desired goal by releasing a biological weapon that spreads a deadly plague across the North American continent. What does Sarat’s last act—as a terrorist/revolutionary—tell us about the speculative project in our present moment? What retrospective view are we gaining if what we’re thinking about is a desire to end

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Abnormals,” trans. Robert Hurley, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 51-58, 51– 52. Quoted in Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 72.20 (Fall 2002) 117-148, 119.

⁴⁰ Puar and Rai 124.

the world? What do we gain by pondering the link between an antiwar and abolitionist position entailed in Sarat's desire for apocalypse? Here, we have to keep in mind the difference between white visions of apocalypse and Black and Brown desires for apocalypse. The premise of *American War* may conjure associations with groups such as the boogaloo movement, who, per SLPC senior research analyst Cassie Miller "don't necessarily have a really cohesive ideology that brings them all together...many of them are libertarians who are really steeped in gun culture. Others are white supremacists and are overtly racist...But the thing that unites them is their belief that the government has overstepped its bounds and that the only way to push back against this perceived tyranny is through a second civil war."⁴¹ However, Sarat's theory of apocalypse is more interested in problematizing the nation (the US) that requires endless war, both abroad and within its borders, and she is willing to take down the national structure by any means necessary, violence included. Even in the first half of the novel, readers know that "somewhere deep in her mind an idea had begun to fester—perhaps the longing for safety was itself just another kind of violence—a violence of cowardice, silence, submission. What was safety, anyway, but the sound of a bomb falling on someone else's home?" (El Akkad 134).

Recall my earlier mention of Sharpe's discussion of the "weather," the environmental quality of racial terror. On the flipside many scholars have written about the racial quality of environmental threats. For example, a June 2020 summary of the "link between climate change and racial justice" on the *Climate Analytics* blog cites several journalistic and academic sources in support of the assertions that "In the United States, disproportionate percentages of people of colour live in places that are polluted with toxic waste, leading to negative health effects such as cancer, asthma, degraded cardiac function and high blood pressure. Research has also highlighted

⁴¹ Anna Bauman and Anthony Brooks, "The Origins Of The Extremist 'Boogaloo' Movement," *WBUR: On Point* (10 July 2020) <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2020/07/10/the-origins-of-the-extremist-boogaloo-movement>

that race has a stronger influence on exposure to pollutants than poverty.”⁴² Recall, too, as we discuss the entanglements of climate change, racialization, and violence, the extrapolation in *American War* of the present US dependence on fossil fuels as the spark of a future Second Civil War. It is worth mentioning that more generally, from an ecological perspective, the 21st century finds us in the midst of a mass extinction “event” in which human-driven violence is killing anywhere from 10-52% of the plant and animal species on Earth.⁴³ In this sense, people are currently and have been the source of the apocalypse for countless species. The novel does the work of showing what it will take to recognize 1) the scale of historic and ongoing violence that can be connected back to American war and that has been strategically rendered out of sight and mind by dominant national narratives, and 2) murder on an apocalyptic scale as a preferred outcome to what (if it wasn’t obvious before, it is now) is presently occurring.

The difference between the likely apocalypse that climate scientists’ extrapolative models project in which humans, going about business-as-usual, extinct ourselves and the apocalyptic event set off by Sarat has to do with the uneven distribution of climate destruction and the other forms of violence discussed already. In contrast to the historical racialized distribution of violence, Sarat turns her apocalypse away from the refugees in camps like the one she grew up in and towards the North American elites and their symbolic attempt to “turn the page” on the events of the Second Civil War with a Reunification Ceremony (El Akkad 299).

This brings me to attempt a description of the particular form of antiwar sentiment the novel evokes. More generally, the extrapolation involved in setting *American War* in 2075, within the

⁴² Adelle Thomas and Ruenna Haynes, “Black Lives Matter: the link between climate change and racial justice,” *Climate Analytics* (22 June 2020) <https://climateanalytics.org/blog/2020/black-lives-matter-the-link-between-climate-change-and-racial-justice/>

⁴³ This statistical range is taken from Elizabeth Kolbert’s citation of Chris D. Thomas et al’s 2004 *Nature* report “Extinction Risk from Climate Change”: Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014) 167.

context of a scientific consensus that marks 2050 or even 2030 as points of no return in terms of carbon emissions, is evocative of an intensive strain of anxiety—what Nixon, writing about speculative nonfiction about climate disasters, terms a “felt immediacy”⁴⁴—that doesn’t exist in the same way in speculative texts such as Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*, which are not set in such proximate futures. More specifically, my understanding of the antiwar sentiment *American War* seems set up to elicit in the reader—that is, the feeling in Whitehead’s description of speculation as consisting of a “lure for feeling”—is that it goes beyond a sympathetic understanding of Sarat’s individual decisions to kill for her cause and enters the realm of abolitionist solidarity as a desire to “burn the system to the ground.” The readers’ intimacy with Sarat amidst the heavy-handed rendering of Sugarloaf as a speculative stand-in for Guantanamo Bay military prison, the fictional submersion of the state of Florida echoing predictions about rising sea levels made by urban planners in Miami, and the entire plot of a Second Civil War between South and North serves to prompt readers to be brought up short by the recognition of real-world similarities and to rage that “this is not right,” as the protagonist of Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season* often says.

The novel resists an antiwar position that thinks of war in its narrow official designation as commencing with a national declaration and ceasing with an armistice or peace treaty and instead advocates for something like the still-popular protest slogan “no justice, no peace,” remembered for its widespread use in the 1992 L.A. uprising. In an exchange with her sister, Sarat expresses her mistrust of her brother’s nursemaid because “she keeps talking to...anyone...who’ll listen about how she doesn’t care who wins, North or South, just as long as there’s no war. Like she’d be happy if the Blues marched on Atlanta tomorrow. You know her parents live up in the North?

⁴⁴ Nixon, “All Tomorrow’s Warnings,” *Public Books* (13 August 2020). <https://www.publicbooks.org/all-tomorrows-warnings/>

Moved there right before the war started.” To which her sister responds, “‘So? Wouldn’t you, if you had no stake in it?’ ‘Nobody has no stake in it,’ said Sarat” (El Akkad 198).

Speculation, Blackness, and an Angry Earth: N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*

The Fifth Season differs from *American War* in terms of the ways it uses speculation, and to what end; for instance, *The Fifth Season* invents new categories of people that do not exist outside of the imagination of the novel. Because it requires the reader to think in terms of categories that do not exist in reality, *The Fifth Season* does not allow the sort of directly predictive and retrospective applications as *American War*, set in a near-future that is a place and time familiar because it uses the same dating system and maps that have been established as real in the US of the present-day. Instead, Jemisin’s novel encourages readers to think about what we can learn about our world and its history and current trajectory by getting completely outside it. In this section, I analyze the ways in which *The Fifth Season* takes a speculative approach to the concept of antiblack racism and of race as a category, and then consider how this literary treatment of race helps readers to think about the central apocalypse of the novel as an event of transformative justice. This enables a return, in the conclusion to this chapter, to the idea of abolition as a future-oriented antiwar commitment.

In the world Jemisin devises in *The Broken Earth* trilogy, Alabaster and the protagonist of *The Fifth Season*, who goes by the names Damaya, Syenite, and Essun at different stages of her life, belong to a kind of sub-species of human known as orogenes (with both meanings of “sub,” the prefix indicating an internal category and the designation of inferiority, at play in the hegemonic discourse of the novel). Orogenes have an intrinsic biological connection to the tectonic plates, through which they are able to draw energy. The imperial city of Yumenes harnesses (quite literally in the case of those beings known as “node maintainers,” discussed in greater detail

shortly) these orogenic abilities in order to quell the earthquakes which constantly rack the surface of the earth, post-climate apocalypse, as evinced by the tales of fracking told anthropomorphically in the above quote. To maintain a supply of properly disciplined orogenes to serve the empire, a system of enslavement cushioned by a ten-step ranking system is devised by agents of a panoptic and involuntary boarding school called the Fulcrum, where children are either bred from high-ranking orogenes or separated from their families when their orogenic abilities become apparent. Each Fulcrum orogene is then managed by a “mentor” from a class of beings called Guardians, who act as overseers and, in the event of escape, slave catchers. Indeed, as may already be clear, the social order is analogous to the conditions of chattel slavery: orogenes’ labor is harnessed and stolen for the benefit of the wealthy, imperial nation. Alabaster recognizes that seizing control of their labor is their method for freeing themselves via the rift. After doomed attempts to achieve freedom by rising through the ranks of the Fulcrum, living as a fugitive in first a quasi-maroon colony and later as by passing for a (non-orogenic) human, Syenite ultimately comes around to Alabaster’s perspective.

Media theorists Jayna Brown and Alexis Lothian argue in their introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* titled *Speculative Life* that the imaginative treatments of scientific developments in science fiction works “can loosen these scientific explorations from their moorings in capitalist economic, military and corporate interests and instead create fantastically anomalous ontologies.”⁴⁵ The project of speculative fiction, they suggest, is concerned with fundamental reconceptualization of categories, rather than extending existing categories beyond the current reality to make a critique. I see Jemisin reconfiguring race as a category in *The Fifth Season* in this way. First, the power structure of the Sanzed empire, wherein Guardians maintain

⁴⁵ Jayna Brown and Alexis Lothian, “Speculative Life: An Introduction,” *Social Text Online* (4 January, 2012) n.p. http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/speculative_life_introduction/

disciplinary control over orogenes for the benefit of humanity, employs race as Weheliye defines it: as ever-precarious sociopolitical processes that nevertheless discipline humanity into full-, not- quite- and non-humans.⁴⁶ Moreover, the two main characters, Syenite and Alabaster, treat their identity as orogenes in a way that calls to mind Beth Coleman's reading of race as technology. And finally, despite Jemisin's para-textual distancing of the world of *The Broken Earth* trilogy from planet Earth, Damaya-Syenite-Essun's movements through various stages of her life can be read as bearing key similarities to different resistance tactics in African American history, which in turn were theorized and dramatized via African American literature.

My reading of *The Fifth Season* is that Jemisin is engaging multiple strands of African American history and literary tradition in the three timelines of the novel at the same time that she uses the loosened constraints of speculation to examine race as a category and a technology outside of established historical racial taxonomies. When I say that Jemisin engages with African American history and literature, I mean this less as a case of direct representation (for example, the Guardians act in ways that resemble the historical accounts and literary portrayals of both antebellum slave catchers and 21st century militarized police, but they are not a one-to-one representation of these real-life entities) than it is a matter of affective resonance.⁴⁷ The affects brought into being by certain scenes in the novel bring the reader into contact with the collective affects of experiences that are recognizable in Black life and writing, for instance, of being taught to fear those in power or to fear showing oneself to the wrong people or in the wrong place. The power of orogeny is a clear example of the way *The Fifth Season* exceeds history and realism, but it is at the same time a way of affectively suggesting Blackness.

⁴⁶ Weheliye 4.

⁴⁷ Here I am thinking about the connection Jonathan Flatley points to, following Walter Benjamin: that "definite resonance between our own personal past and a historical, collective past": *Affective Mapping* 73.

Jemisin’s speculative treatment of race is a project both necessitated and brought into question by the coexistence, in our current moment, of a more widespread acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of race as a category and the myriad forms of ongoing antiblack racism that, in geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s terms, produces and exploits “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁴⁸ Keeling, Gilmore, Sharpe, and others offer a theory of race that informs the necessity of my turn to the speculative functions of El Akkad and Jemisin’s novels at the end of this study of and engagement with antiwar literature. Speculation, as a literary form, offers a way of thinking *otherwise* about the impasses and incommensurabilities that endure in global racial capitalism. If ending oppression (and antiblack racism in particular) were a matter of enough people understanding the systems and experience of exploitation, it would already be over because most of the global population is exploited under global capitalism. In a similar vein, if people just listened to each other, those without lived experience of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression would in their newfound knowledge and empathy come around to fighting against it (this is, to some extent, the assumption undergirding Hersey’s *Hiroshima* reportage). This is also not, so far, borne out in reality. Nevertheless, Jemisin, along with El Akkad, is interested in breaking out of or moving beyond the genre of the impasse as described by Lauren Berlant in her work on cruel optimism amidst the impasse of the historical present, where an “optimistic attachment is invested in one’s own or the world’s continuity.”⁴⁹ *American War* and *The Fifth Season* are invested in exploring what could be possible if optimism is exhausted or understood as an option that was never available. The

⁴⁸ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007) 28.

Keeling points out the persistence of antiblack violence amidst a growing consciousness of a social rather than biological origin of race (60).

⁴⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011) 13.

purposeful apocalypses in each novel signal a different claim about the actions that are both possible and productive in such a situation of exhaustion or foreclosure than, for example, Sharpe's focus on survival in *In the Wake* or Moten's focus on improvisation in "Black Op" and other contemporaneous writings. In this sense, Sharpe and Moten's arguments could be viewed as ontologies of the impasse.⁵⁰ What other tack is put forth in the Black queer speculative imagining of race in *The Fifth Season*?

Several scenes in the novel demonstrate the discrimination Syenite and Alabaster endure in terms that are straightforwardly translatable as antiblack racism. Twice, the verb "lynch" is used to describe an immanent threat to orogenes and orogene-sympathizers: first, in Syenite's response to Alabaster's suggestion that orogenes could take power—"That would last for about ten minutes before every Guardian in the Stillness shows up to *lynch* us, with half the continent in tow to watch and cheer" (Jemisin 124)—and second, when Lerna tells Essun what happened after she killed several community guards escaping their settlement:

Half the damned Strongbacks were running around drunk and armed, raiding the storecaches, accusing every other person of being a rogga or a rogga-lover. The other half were doing the same thing—quieter, though, and sober, which was worse. I knew it was only a matter of time till they thought about me. Everybody knew I was your friend.

...I was thinking I could make it down to Brilliance, where my mother's family came from...Better than staying in Tirimo, anyway, to get *lynched*. (Jemisin 403)

In a scene in which Alabaster and Syenite confront the deputy governor of the town they have been sent by their "employer," the Fulcrum, to assist, a professionally passive-aggressive racism quickly morphs into a more directly dehumanizing version when the deputy, Asael, says: "What do you want? An apology? Then I apologize. You must remember, though, that most normal people have never seen an orogene, let alone had to do business with one, and--' She spreads her hands. 'Isn't

⁵⁰ "For Berlant, the genre of the impasse disrupts familiar narrative trajectories that would herald the end of suffering or promise a better life, and emphasizes instead how people endure their precariously lived conditions by improvising and adjusting to them": Elizabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Freedom: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014) 18.

it understandable that we might be...uncomfortable?” Syenite responds that “...that’s a really shitty apology. ‘I’m sorry you’re so abnormal that I can’t manage to treat you like a human being.’” The text continues, “‘You’re a rogga,’ Asael snaps, and then has the gall to look surprised at herself. / ‘Well.’ Syenite makes herself smile. ‘At least that’s out in the open’” (Jemisin 216). The juxtaposition of “normal people” and orogenes (the politically correct term for those with Syenite and Alabaster’s abilities, as opposed to the slur “rogga”) in Asael’s initial defensive statement demonstrates her unabashed view of herself as the only *person* in the room, categorically different from the two individuals to whom she finds herself patronizingly explaining her situation.

“Officially speaking,” the reader learns from Essun in a subsequent chapter, orogenes are not classified as human “per the Second Yumenescene Lore Council’s *Declaration on the Rights of the Orogenically Afflicted*, a thousand-ish years ago” (Jemisin 244). Late in the novel, Alabaster confronts Syenite with the “vulgar” truth that “that we’re not human is just the lie they tell themselves so they don’t have to feel bad about how they treat us--” in an obvious analogy to abolitionist arguments about the function of antiblack racism (Jemisin 354). At the start of their meeting with Asael, Syenite reminds herself to behave with discipline: “She must be cold and calm in her anger, lest a lack of self-control be dismissed as the mark of monstrosity” (Jemisin 215). Already expecting to be viewed as a stereotype, which aligns with that of the “angry Black woman,” Syenite polices her emotional output.⁵¹ As we have seen, her thought, preparation, and

⁵¹ In describing the lifetime of anger she has built up in response to racism (and sexism), Audre Lorde writes in a way that evokes the descriptions of Damaya-Syenite-Essun’s orogeny in *The Fifth Season*: “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. *Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.* And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of *a basic and radical alteration* in all those assumptions underlining”: Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 1 & 2 (1997) 278-285, 280.

actions make no difference to Asael's reception of her, which had been predetermined by her designation as an orogene.

In discussions about the trilogy, Jemisin signposts connections between its future world and US history, complicating her claims to their distinctiveness. In a recent interview, Jemisin connected the conceit of her fiction to her lived reality:

When you recognize the fact that we live in a society that is willing to roll out the damn army when a peaceful protest of people is taking place, when you begin to understand the scope of forces arrayed against a concept like Black equality, when you begin to realize how much, how many years of effort and energy are engaged in keeping my ancestors and me from having a decent life, it starts to feel like the Earth is out to get you.⁵²

Jemisin specifies in the same interview that she was writing *The Broken Earth* trilogy "all around the time of Ferguson,"⁵³ which, when taken together with my reading of *American War*, underlines the link between militarized white supremacy in the domestic and foreign actions of US government.⁵⁴ At odds with her statements distancing the world of the Stillness from US history, or even Planet Earth, Jemisin's statements in this interview illustrate that the novel can be and is influenced by and evocative of specific historical events without being a one-to-one allegory.

Finally, the plot of the novel that spans the life of its protagonist from youth to middle age, sustains an allegorical relationship to at least three prominent schools of thought in African American history and literature. Damaya-Syenite-Essun's ability to adopt new names and identities is a literary representation of the fungibility of Blackness, which is also formally suggested by the way in which the chapters in the novel time-hop from one storyline to the next in

⁵² Jessica Hurley and N. K. Jemisin, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin," *ASAP/Journal* 3.3 (2018): 476.

⁵³ Hurley and Jemisin, 471.

⁵⁴ Kathleen Belew's history of the white power white power movement notes its consistent relation to the military and militarization, pointing out, for instance, the use of Vietnam-era weapons and narratives in anti-immigrant and anti-Black terror and the ways in which vigilante violence complemented state policies in order to ask of the movement's turn to anti-federal government/anti-statist violence in mid-80's—were white power proponents actually opposed to what the state represented? Belew, *Bring the War Home* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

order to keep the unity of the narrative a secret from the reader until the first installment in the trilogy is almost finished.⁵⁵

In her defining years coming of age and into her identity as an orogene, Syenite adopts an attitude of structural reform. She knows the Fulcrum is a cruel and dangerous place of rigid hierarchies (some scalable, such as the ring system by which orogenes' powers are measured and relative freedoms are doled out, and others fixed: namely, the power relation between humans, Guardians, and orogenes) but believes she can work her way to the top with her orogenic abilities in a manner that brings to mind longstanding debates about "Black excellence."⁵⁶

During her partnership with Alabaster, forced upon them by the Fulcrum for labor and breeding purposes, Syenite is radicalized by his "vulgar" truths, quoted earlier, and most dramatically, by his insistence that she confront the total violence at the core of the societal infrastructure the Fulcrum oversees by visiting a node maintainer station. Although this scene in the novel *feels* climactic, it occurs barely a quarter of the way in. It is preceded by a moment in which Alabaster psychoanalyzes Syenite's general sense of anger toward him as her "hat[ing] the world... You have the way we live. The way the world makes us live. Either the Fulcrum owns us, or we have to hide and be hunted down like dogs if we're ever discovered. Or we become monsters and try to kill everything. Even within the Fulcrum we always have to think about how *they* want

⁵⁵ On the fungibility of Blackness, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (especially "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance" 17-48); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 65-81; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017; and Tiffany Lethabo-King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Charleston, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), especially 21-27. Keeling repositions malleability as a *potential* in the sense that Black people are already fluid where others are not; whiteness requires the stability of homogeneous time to feel secure where Blackness does not because this "stability" has only provided violence to Black people, never security (*Queer Times, Black Futures* 76).

⁵⁶ A recent opinion piece covering the debate on Black excellence summed up its purpose as a "necessary and defiant narrative that separates brilliance from whiteness, realigning and centring it on Blackness" and its problematic effect of normalizing "society's reluctance to allow Black people to access their own humanity unless they exhibit what society categorises as markers of 'exceptionalism'": Elisabeth Fapuro, "We Need to Talk About the Pressure of Black Excellence," *Refinery29* (21 October 2020) <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2020/10/10098749/why-is-black-excellence-important>.

us to act. We can never just...be...There should be a better way” (Jemisin 123, italics and second ellipses in original text). This recounting of their options for living under the current system as orogenes serves as foreshadowing for events later in the novel and also provides two interpretations of the rift Alabaster and Syenite eventually cause. On the one hand, it can be viewed as their devolution into murderous “monsters,” while on the other, they can be understood as trying to create the conditions for a “better way,” in which people like them can “just...be.”

Syenite and Alabaster travel days out of the way of their Fulcrum job in order to visit the node maintainer station, which houses one of a network of Fulcrum-controlled orogenes forced to quell “shakes” in their surrounding portion of the national power grid. Node maintainers, the reader learns along with Syenite, for this information is not taught to children at the Fulcrum or in human communities, are child-orogenes who have been essentially lobotomized and thus reduced to purely orogenic and biological functions (the latter of which are then addressed with feeding tube, catheter, drool-catching cloth, and the like). The infrastructure of the Yumenes empire, then, is entirely supported by orogenes who are fully dehumanized by the state and hidden from public view. The connection to the history of US wealth and the whitewashing of the slave trade are clear.

As they approach the station, an intense earthquake erupts, which has been caused by the node maintainer and perhaps serves as the inspiration for Alabaster’s rift. “An orogene who spontaneously creates a supervolcano does not do so without generating a torus the size of a town,” Syenite thinks to herself, “She can’t see anything from here, but somewhere out there, a Fulcrum orogene has killed everything in a several-mile radius...Why?” (Jemisin 133). After asking this question, the novel finally shows us, through Syenite’s perspective, the node maintainer. Alabaster adds context to the visual spectacle that Syenite takes in “in little details” because she cannot at first grasp the totality of the situation (Jemisin 139). He tells her/us that the

instinctive acts of shake-quelling cause node maintainers great pain, that a “still-livid bruise on the boy’s upper thigh” is probably from “some local citizen who paid for the privilege...there are many who enjoy this sort of thing. A helplessness fetish, basically” (Jemisin 142). The node maintainers hark back, affectively, to Saidiya Hartman’s description of “deployment of sexuality in the context of...black captivity—the reproduction of property, the relations of mastery and subjection, and the regularity of sexual violence.”⁵⁷ With the inclusion of the bruise on the node maintainer, Jemisin reminds us, much as Sharpe does through her reading of Kara Walker’s artwork, of the necessity of connecting the violence and mastery of slavery to a sense of pleasure; though Syenite and Alabaster discuss node maintainers in terms of the Fulcrum’s “ingenious” “utility,” the bruise insists that we view the child’s carefully calibrated semi-consciousness as something that was *enjoyable* to the people who held power in Yumenes.⁵⁸

Syenite reflects on the impact of Alabaster’s insistent truth-spouting as *affective* rather than informative:

Not that she hadn’t known it before: that she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body. It’s one thing to know this, to admit it to herself, but it’s the sort of truth that none of them use against each other—not even to make a point—because doing so is cruel and unnecessary. This is why she hates Alabaster: not because he is more powerful, not even because he is crazy, but because he refuses to allow her any of the polite fictions and unspoken truths that have kept her comfortable, and safe, for years. (Jemisin 348)

Here, the novel explicitly connects the existence of Syenite (and all orogenes) within the Fulcrum’s system to slavery. This passage also demonstrates the power of acknowledging this truth, out loud, with other orogenes. While Syenite finds Alabaster’s insistence on saying these things to her “cruel and unnecessary,” this is only because she believes there is no alternative to this way of life. The novel illustrates Syenite’s gradual journey toward the final relinquishment of her attachment to

⁵⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 84.

⁵⁸ For instance, see Sharpe on the useful pleasure of the Black mammy figure: *Monstrous Intimacies* 183-84.

nation as it is represented by the Fulcrum and, in particular, to her Guardian, Schaffa, about whom she thinks in a scene in which he has broken her hand to show her that he will hurt and even kill her if she cannot maintain perfect control of her orogeny, “he is the only person left whom she can love” (Jemisin 104). The love Syenite (then Damaya) feels for Schaffa is entirely manufactured by the systematic Fulcrum practice of separating children from their parents and assigning them to a Guardian. This is not unlike the message of the US state to Black Americans: this is the land of the free—but take one step out of line and the state will shoot to kill. Indeed, stepping “out of line” is not a prerequisite for state-sanctioned murder; as Damaya comes to realize of Schaffa, “you’ll hurt me even when I do obey. If you think you should” (Jemisin 102). Combined with the radicalization caused by the experiences of seeing Alabaster’s child-become-node-maintainer and twice mourning the death of a young son,⁵⁹ Alabaster’s insistence that Syenite acknowledge the truths she learned in her first days with Schaffa leads her to set her sights on a purposeful apocalypse as an opening onto another existence, in another world.

These radicalizing moments lead Syenite to reach a point where she is unable to go on living within and perpetuating the system. “*We are the gods in chains and this is not. Rusting. Right,*” she thinks to herself as she attempts to access her connection to an obelisk without knowing that when she does, she will set off a rupture in the surface of the earth that will decimate Asael’s town, Allia (Jemisin 262, original emphasis). At this point, Alabaster and Syenite are saved from death by the deus ex machina of the Stone eater Antimony (who both protects and eventually

⁵⁹ Syenite’s loss of her children echoes both the mysterious oral tradition of the novel, which states that “at the height of human hubris and might, it was the orogenes who did something that even Earth could not forgive: They destroyed his only child” (Jemisin 380), Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* as the ur-text of Black matricide, and nonfiction accounts such as poet Claudia Rankine’s article, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” *New York Times Magazine* (22 June, 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>. See also Elizabeth Alexander’s meditation on raising Black sons in an environment of antiblack violence in “The Trayvon Generation,” *New Yorker* (15 June 2020) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>.

literally consumes Alabaster), who whisks them away, through the earth, to the island of Meov. Both Syenite and Alabaster are aware that the apocalyptic destruction of Allia and all of its inhabitants is what makes Meov a safe haven for them—the Fulcrum will think they are dead—but their perspectives on this fact are at this point in the narrative incompatible. Syenite is racked by guilt (“Not even Asael deserved the death she probably suffered,” she thinks) but Alabaster is “grinning, practically dancing in place. She’s never seen him so excited before. It’s like he’s not even aware of the price that’s been paid for their freedom...or maybe he just doesn’t care” (Jemisin 345). In this moment, Alabaster bears a resemblance to advocates of armed slave rebellions, and the gap between his and Syenite’s reaction to the orogeny-induced apocalypse at Allia forces the question of the relation of destruction and liberation.

I read the segments of the novel set on Meov as a speculative vision analogous to a maroon colony. The island community is unique in the world of Jemisin’s trilogy for two connected reasons: first, they have survived the recurring Fifth Seasons that have wiped out small comms and empires alike, and second, “they don’t kill their roggas, here. They put them in *charge*” (296), which is what makes Syenite and Alabaster welcome guests upon their arrival. The people of Meov’s survival is due to a combination of location (being a seafaring people, they don’t need to worry about storing surpluses of food for the next Season of hardship) and societal structure. Orogenic labor is useful to the community, and so instead of enslaving orogenes, the community puts makes them their leaders. Innon, the current leader of Meov, is a “feral, born free and raised openly,” meaning that he has not been “trained” or “domesticated” by the Fulcrum’s ring system (Jemisin 349). Even the term “feral” as opposed to “wild” bears the trace of Fulcrum thinking, in that it characterizes the natural state of orogenes as “domesticated” and those who are not Fulcrum-trained as deviating from the norm. Once she has come to know and love him, Syenite cannot

imagine Innon as himself apart from his freedom: “She doesn’t even want to think about what he would be like if he had grown up in captivity with the rest of them. Innon, but without his booming laugh or vivacious hedonism or cheerful confidence. Innon, without his graceful strong hands weaker and clumsier for having been broken. *Not Innon*” (Jemisin 386). Innon’s uncorrupted mindset provides a third way of thinking about the world, inconsistent with Alabaster’s insistent truth-telling and Syenite’s preference for leaving those truths politely unsaid, because for Innon, the world is not organized in a human/orogene dichotomy that mirrors Wilderson’s analysis of the relation between human and slave.⁶⁰

Complementing the way in which Innon expands Alabaster and Syenite’s capacities for thinking about their orogenic identity and the possibility of power structures besides that of the Fulcrum is his role in opening up their capacities to take pleasure in their bodies, which had heretofore been shameful for their orogeny (the first scene, chronologically, in which we encounter Syenite, then named Damaya, finds her hiding in the barn after being unable to suppress her abilities) or made use of mechanically for the reproductive demands of the system. In the Middle Passage, notes Tinsley, “unnamed rebellions took place not in violent but in erotic resistance, in interpersonal relationships enslaved Africans formed with those imprisoned and oozing beside them.”⁶¹ As Syenite reflects on the trio’s sexual relationship,

Alabaster watches while Innon obliges her, and his gaze grows hot with it, which Syenite still doesn’t understand even after being with them for almost two years. ‘Baster doesn’t want her, not that way, nor she him. And yet it’s unbelievably arousing for her to watch Innon drive him to moaning and begging, and Alabaster also clearly gets off on her going to pieces with someone else. She likes it *more* when ‘Baster’s watching, in fact. They can’t

⁶⁰ “One of the things that Marriot and Fanon each say is that, generically speaking, the structure by which human beings are recognized by other human beings and incorporated into a community of human beings, is anti-slave. And slaveness is something that has consumed blackness and Africanness, making it impossible to divide slavery from blackness. Even if I say to myself, ‘I am not a slave,’ we don’t make our own way in the world”: “We’re Trying to Destroy the World”: M. Gržinić, A. Stojnić (eds.), “Anti-Blackness and Police Violence After Ferguson,” *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance* (2018) 48. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78343-7_3

⁶¹ 198.

stand sex with each other directly, but vicariously it's amazing. And what do they even call this? It's not a threesome, or a love triangle. It's a two-and-a-half-some, an affection dihedron. (And, well, maybe it's love.) (Jemisin 372)

Tinsley writes of Dionne Brand's poetry collection *A Map to the Door of No Return* as a "project that allows the marooned of the diaspora another kind of queer coupling: the possibility of *putting the world together* and *putting the senses back together* at the same time."⁶² In her discussion of the Black queer Atlantic, Tinsley here notes that another world and way of feeling is possible, with the implication of "put back together" being that *this* world has or will have been destroyed. However, Meov exists in the temporal and geographical world of the Stillness, not apart from or after it. Therefore, Meov is never represented as safe. Within the everyday economy of Meov, there is the mortal danger of the pirating excursions through which the community produces its wealth, a danger that is emphasized when Syenite wishes to join the raids and is discouraged because of her status as a mother. And then, of course, there is the looming danger from outside of Meov, which Syenite underscores with her insistence that Schaffa will never stop tracking her (Jemisin 347). The thing that makes Meov *feel* safe, though, is the sex.

On Meov, the novel provides a vision of what true emancipation would feel like by narrating Alabaster's relinquishment of the demand for fugitivity that has shaped his daily life up until this period of respite. Alabaster is a virtuoso of living in fugitive movement. When Syenite meets him, he is trying to maintain the appearance that he is a good advocate to the Fulcrum, but he always has a hidden motive, whether he is exploring his relationship to the obelisks or simply pushing back, within carefully measured reason, against people in power (such as when he demands better accommodations from Asael in exchange for the urgent orogenic service he and Syenite are providing for the town). Away from the empire, he still takes on the labor of quelling tectonic shakes on the island, but his affect is no longer strained and exhausted but completely

⁶² 211, emphasis original.

content: he wants to live on Meov forever, loves caring for the son Syenite bears, Corundum, and living as a family unit with Innon and Syenite (whereas she feels less than completely satisfied by the role of mother). The reader is presented with a sense of what such emancipation feels like, while the foreshadowing of danger that undergirds the scenes in the novel that take place on Meov prohibit a completely mimetic response to Alabaster's calm. Ultimately, there is a sense of inevitability to the violent rupture of Syenite, Innon, Alabaster, and Corundum's domestic idyll. This drives home the point that there is no safe haven for orogenes in the Stillness, which in turn primes the reader to agree with Essun's decision at the end of the book to aid Alabaster in guaranteeing that the rift will be severe enough to destroy humanity.

With the destruction of the relative domestic tranquility of Meov as a queer safe haven, Syenite turns to a strategy of passing for human, changing her name to Essun and integrating into a comm, or community, where she works as a schoolteacher, marries a man, and mothers two more children, both of whom she attempts to teach to hide their orogenic abilities. The novel opens on Essun's discovery that her youngest child's orogeny has been discovered, and the child's father has killed him for it. Faced for the second time with the annihilation of an environment of relative safety that she has cultivated, and with this return to vulnerability the death of her child, Essun comes at last to join Alabaster in using her orogeny (and the particular connection with the mysteriously detached obelisks, which Alabaster has taught Essun to channel) to end the world. In this way, Essun becomes a literary embodiment of a utopian possibility shared by strains of queer and anticolonial theory that Keeling gathers together when she asserts that

identifying a figure of radical alterity, and therefore potent danger to the existing structures of signification and the inequities and violence they rationalize, both the antirelational mode of Queer Theory and anticolonial theories that target for destruction and rebirth the ontological construction of the "Human" in Western thought and civilization share a utopian vision that the world as we know it can be absolutely destroyed through the mobilization of an agent produced within it. (89)

Keeling writes of ending the “world as we know it,” the world of liberal humanism that Sylvia Wynter has shown us has, at its core, always pursued the project of racialization for the purpose of providing moral and/or rational logic for the total violence of colonization, slavery, genocide. The rift in *The Fifth Season* is a narrative response to the speculative question suggested by these theoretical writings: what if minoritarian people realized that with the combined force of their labor they could crack the world in half?

Alabaster opens a rift in the tectonic plates directly underneath Yumenes by channeling his extraordinary powers of orogeny, communing with the invisible yet ever-present energy of the stone that makes up the crust of the earth, the vitality of which the novel consistently calls attention to with anthropomorphic references to the earth as a Father, angry with his human creations for their mistreatment of him, and with the invention of the stone eaters, another type of being that can take a human-esque form but is made of geological material. Alabaster’s rift initiates a “Season” more deadly than the semi-regular quake-apocalypses chronicled in an Appendix of the novel, and, when considered not in geological time but on the scale of a human lifespan, Alabaster’s rift is virtually and purposefully permanent:

He wants *everything* silent.

“End,” he says. “Please.”

And then he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection...he reaches deep and takes hold of the humming tapping bustling reverberating rippling vastness of the city, and the quieter bedrock beneath it, and the roiling churn of heat and pressure beneath that. Then he reaches wide, taking hold of the great sliding-puzzle piece of earthshell on which the continent sits.

Lastly, he reaches up. For power.

He takes all that, the strata and the magma and the people and the power, in his imaginary hands. Everything. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him.

Then *he breaks it*. (6-7, emphasis original)

Syenite's repeated inner monologue that "this is not right" (Jemisin 371), primes her to be called in to "making it [the rift] worse" at the conclusion of *The Fifth Season* (449).

In addition to thinking about how the rift of *The Fifth Season* is different from (and yet in conversation with) Sarat's purposeful apocalypse in *American War*, I also want to think about the significant differences between particular future orientation of *The Fifth Season* and the future orientations that have sustained communities of Black and Brown queer writers (and artists) via critical theory. One such community is described by Chambers-Leston in his 2018 *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. Chambers-Leston writes to his late mentor and friend, queer theorist and performance studies scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz, quoting Muñoz's characterization of an attachment to punk rock, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: "I was able to imagine a time and a place that was not yet there, a place where I tried to live."⁶³ On the flipside of Muñoz's utopian project of imagining a future place that could be lived in in the (fleeting) present moment might be the identification of performance art practices that attempt to bring into being a "people who are missing, a people to come" by fellow performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o through what he calls Afro-fabulation.⁶⁴ While Muñoz structures his hope around art and criticism that could bring a future place into being, Nyong'o looks to the same in order to substantiate a future people. What unites these thinkers is their commitment to the future as a site (or, in Muñoz's terms, a horizon) of possibility for living or being otherwise and to art as something that can allow us to see these other times and possibilities.

⁶³ Chambers-Leston xv.

⁶⁴ Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018) 82.

A direct reason for a turn to art and toward the future is that the present/reality does not provide resources to sustain the lives of queer Black⁶⁵ people and in fact is itself sustained by the murder and oppression of those groups.⁶⁶ As Chambers-Leston, following Muñoz in his use of the term “minoritarian,” and Nyong’o with his afro-fabulations remind us, Black speculative works “are the tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of Black social life, already false.”⁶⁷ Speculative projects ask: what other societies and systems are possible? Where and when do we need to locate our thought in order to bring them into being?

Of course, in conceptualizations of time such as Keeling’s that I find compelling for the way they complement the queer Black speculation of *The Fifth Season*, the present and future are impossible to sever from one another, and thus cannot be considered in complete isolation from one another. James Snead’s influential 1981 essay “On Repetition in Black Culture” distinguishes “black culture” and its basis in the “cut,” which hews to the cyclical mode of seasons and harvests, from “European culture” and its fixation on “material progress” and the Hegelian conception of history as the continual evolution of Man. For Snead, “this magic of the ‘cut’ attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over, but by making room for them inside the system.”⁶⁸ On the one hand, Snead’s conceptualization of black culture as characterized by repetition and the acceptance or integration of rupture allows for a reading of *The Fifth Season* such as gender studies

⁶⁵ These descriptors—queer, Black—are not discrete, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley makes clear in her insistence on the queerness of relations (of any and all kinds) between Africans aboard slave ships in the Middle Passage, defining “*Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths”: “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14.2-3 (2008) 191-215, 199.

⁶⁶ See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (Fall 2003) 257-337, especially 283-303. Wynter politically and philosophically situates the historical moment in which the “modern phenomenon of race, as a new, extrahumanly determined classificatory principle and mechanism of domination (Quijano 2000), was first invented” (296).

⁶⁷ Nyong’o 6. See also Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

⁶⁸ James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *African American Review* 50.4 (Winter 2017): 648-656, 652. Article originally published in *Black American Literature Forum* 15.4 (Winter, 1981), 146-154.

scholar Rebecca Wanzo's, which highlights "attachment to indeterminacy" in the novel⁶⁹ On the other, it allows the interpretation of the rift as a response to the question: if the culture you are part of has no problem with repetition, and your heritage is marked by purposeful ruptures designed to reduce you to slavery through total violence, why not end it all to start something better? The apocalypse of the rift is only an existential threat to cultures steeped within homogeneous time—what Keeling refers to as "straight time"⁷⁰—because it threatens the entire edifice maintaining their dominance and supposed superiority.⁷¹ For the reader of *The Fifth Season*, what is to be gained by *imagining* such a world-ending rupture? What "there" and "then" does it make possible, and what aspects of the existing social order does such an act of imagination threaten?⁷²

With this complex relation of past, present, and future in Black queer (as opposed to straight/Western) time in mind, what I am calling attention to in contrasting the abolitionist antiwar undercurrents of *American War* and *The Fifth Season* is a shift in focus or priority: think of a camera changing the focus from an object in the foreground to one slightly behind, thereby blurring the object in front and drawing your eye toward the crisp heretofore-background item. What changes from abolition as destructive to abolition as transformative is a matter of emphasis within a single project.

⁶⁹ Discussed in Wanzo's presentation at "The Unfinished Business of Cruel Optimism: Crisis, Affect, Sentimentality," Lynch Lecture by Lauren Berlant presented by the Bonham Centre at University of Toronto (19 Nov. 2020).

⁷⁰ Keeling 86 and elsewhere. For more on "straight" time and sexuality, see Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019) and the roundtable Freeman moderated on time and queerness: Dinshaw, Carolyn, et al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 177-195. muse.jhu.edu/article/215002.

⁷¹ As Keeling writes of Sun Ra's refrain in the classic Afrofuturist film *Space is the Place* ("It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?"), the question "asserts another temporality and coordinates, which exist within, but are incommensurate with, those taken as the dominant logics of existence of a world (only one) characterized by statistical predictability, control, temporal continuity, and coherence" (53).

⁷² "Art's formal alienation from the 'real world' (its translation and abstraction of reality into the aesthetic dimension) opens up the possibility for subverting and sublimating the existing world": Chambers-Leston 23.

Alabaster summarizes his abolitionist philosophy as, “‘You can’t make anything better,’ he says, heavily. ‘The world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over again, there’s no changing it’” (Jemisin 371). *Essun*, and more so the novel itself, are even more focused than Alabaster on the better world that is to come out his act of destruction. The perspective established by the first sentence of *The Fifth Season* offers an avenue through which to begin thinking about its theory of race and Blackness in relation to apocalypse. Keeling calls attention to the historical impetus for thinking these concepts together, which has been explicitly theorized by now-classic works of critical race theory: “For Glissant, the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade and the formation of ‘the new world’ mark an apocalyptic catastrophe. We are forged in its wake.”⁷³ Blackness exists after the end of the world. What new ways of living together are possible, then, if this post-apocalyptic present is vaporized to make room for something completely new, if only in the space of the novel?

Jemisin’s novel speculates a narrativization of ending the world completely. No more stone tablets bearing disciplinary lore, no more humans with their seemingly inexorable desire to enslave and exploit. The aural similarity of the name of the imperial seat of power that Alabaster targets, Yumenes, to “humans”/“humanity” underscores the reading of the rift as a purposeful apocalypse with such an all-encompassing aim. Despite her ability to survive in the world through fugitivity and improvisation, *Essun* seems to acknowledge, with her acquiescence in the final pages of the novel, to help Alabaster “make it worse,” that fugitivity and improvisation are tactics that function *within* the symbolic order that in so many consequential ways mirrors our own, which has tied Black bodies to death. In this way, fugitivity and improvisation could be said to *require* the continued existence of the symbolic order, and *The Fifth Season* comments on their physical and

⁷³ Keeling 54.

theoretical limitations. In seeking to “move on to more interesting things,” the novel is interested in imagining the possibility of breaking with any cultural heritage for anyone and then seeing what might come out of that. Jemisin engages with some of the same problems and possibilities studied by the queer of color and Black theorists I have mentioned, but she pushes past Muñoz’s queer utopian horizons and Moten’s “Black op[timism]” to invite the reader to think about a world whose horizons have been exploded—or whose every creature with eyes to gaze upon the horizons has been turned to dust, perhaps a different route to the same result. Jemisin’s narrative of Alabaster and Essun’s desire for apocalypse as a means to abolition makes revolution feelable and thinkable to the reader. If, as Fredric Jameson famously said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, *The Fifth Season* builds a world that it then wills its characters to end, and in doing so, the novel creates a “then and there” from which its readers can imagine the end of a social order. Add to this the analogies to US racial capitalism, and the social order the reader is invited to imagine abolishing is the US nation-state and its political, economic, and ideological systems. Inasmuch as militarism is an (indeed *the* preeminent) engine of global capitalism, a text that challenges us to think outside these systems fits the bill of an antiwar text.

An important exception to the aforementioned total annihilation made possible by the speculative form of the novel are the stone eaters, at least one of whom readers are led to believe survives the rift. The disembodied second-person narrator of the sections of the novel that follow Essun is at the end of the novel revealed to be the stone eater Hoa, speaking from a place with no horizons to describe the damage caused by the rift:

The line is deep and raw, a cut to the quick of the planet...The earth is good at healing itself. This wound will scab over quickly in geologic terms, and then the cleansing ocean will follow its line to bisect the Stillness into two lands. Until this happens, however, the wound will fester with not only heat but gas and gritty, dark ash—enough to choke off the sky across most of the Stillness’s face within a few weeks. Plants everywhere will die, and the animals that depend on them will starve, and the animals that eat those will starve.

Winter will come early, and hard, and it will last a long, long time. It *will* end, of course, like every winter does, and then the world will return to its old self. Eventually. Eventually.

...*Eventually* meaning in this case *in a few thousand years*. (Jemisin 7-8, emphasis original)

In these disembodied scene-setting narrations and in events throughout Syenite's life, Jemisin's narrative lets go of a humanist attachment to futurity and refuses to engage in a reparative relation to the concept. Syenite forgoes reproduction by taking agency over her situation on Meov, first by insisting on leaving the island to engage in piracy rather than full-time mothering, and ultimately by smothering Corundum in an act of protection and refusal to allow him to be taken into slavery by her Guardian, Schaffa, in a scene clearly harking back to the primal scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1990) and its historical inspiration, Margaret Garner and an untold number of unnamed mothers who were compelled to make the same awful choice.

Conclusion: An Antiwar Apocalypse: Abolition at the End of the World

Both *American War* and *The Fifth Season* contest hegemonic framing of violence (and terrorism), which we can see clearly by pairing them with critical conversations in Black Studies and environmental studies. This contestation is particularly apparent when the novels broach the subject of apocalypse. As Black queer subjects, Sarat and Alabaster do not relate to death as something ahead of them to be feared; their everyday present is steeped in it. "Death is not ahead of blackness as a future shared with others; death is our life, lived in the present."⁷⁴ If the temporal relation between blackness and death is in the present, then the future is (able to be) something else. This is in opposition to a (white) hegemonic relation to death that is future-oriented and an understanding of the apocalypse as a possible future that induces terror, forcing one to either come

⁷⁴ Rinaldo Walcott, "Black Queer Studies, Freedom, and Other Human Possibilities," *Understanding Blackness through Performance: Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*, eds. Anne Crémieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 144. Quoted in Chambers-Leston xvi.

to terms with dying⁷⁵ or to contemplate a survivalist mode of living.⁷⁶ Terror and an experience of life as constantly under threat are qualities shared by this hegemonic conception of apocalypse and Sharpe's "weather" of antiblackness. The key distinction is that hegemonic apocalypse is always sometime off in the future and always only a possibility,⁷⁷ whereas the climate of death and terror is current and ongoing in Black life.

The (ever)present-ness of death in Black life means that "*still* being alive is rich with a world-changing, revolutionary power."⁷⁸ In this sense, Sarat and Essun derive their power to, respectively, set off and worsen an apocalyptic event and the desire to do so from their lived experience as Black women. In *American War* and *The Fifth Season*, it is as if the protagonists have taken it upon themselves to mete out the oft-cited conditional from the Combahee River Collective statement on Black feminism: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."⁷⁹ The rift that Essun vows to "make worse" sits atop the imperial city, Yumenes, the geographical nexus of the systems of oppression in her world. And Sarat targets the Reunification Ceremony, literally guaranteeing the deaths of all major government officials and also attacking the idea that reunification would reform the US in terms of state violence.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ I'm thinking of recent films such as *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, directed by Lorene Scafaria (New York: Focus Features, 2012).

⁷⁶ Max Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2006), for example.

⁷⁷ A big caveat here is that, with the increasingly undeniable evidence of global climate change, the apocalypse is ever-encroaching toward the present (in 2050...in 2030...) in the imaginaries of even the most privileged populations in the world.

⁷⁸ Chambers-Leston 33.

⁷⁹ The Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (April 1977). <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>.

⁸⁰ This reading of *The Fifth Season* also sees the novel pushing past another type of horizontal thinking—that of reformist positions that operate within the structure of racial capitalism and advocate for relief in terms future-oriented terms such as "once we achieve a post-racial society" or "once there is public acceptance of same-sex marriage."

The Fifth Season imagines a world with fantasy elements and plays with racial discourses (how are racial stereotypes talked about, who writes race into history, and how does race inform one's self-understanding) in order to describe living in an environment of antiblackness speculatively, without naming it as such. This reading of the novel enables the consideration of a similar speculative strategy involved in its treatment of war. For instance, we might ask: if there is a type of war at play in the lore that characterizes "Father Earth" as hating people, what does this affective anthropomorphism make possible? Are Innon and Alabaster proponents of two different antiwar strategies? What might the enslavement of orogenes by the Sanzed empire tell us about how to understand US policing as a war on the US population (this connection and its historical link to slavery made particularly visible in the scene of heavily armed Guardians descending on Meov to retrieve Alabaster, Syenite, and their child)?

One key takeaway that the readings of *The Fifth Season* and *American War* have demonstrated about the shape an antiwar position takes in this particular genre of future-oriented fiction is that speculation about what other times and places exist or might one day exist that are livable gets us away from political projects attached to reform. Reform ends up funneling more money into the program that needs to be "fixed" and ends up beefing up the system that is at issue. This is true of neoliberal institutions generally (prisons, policing) but especially obvious with regard to the military. There is no change to funding of the military that will not dump more money into it: a decreased military budget is outside of the political imagination of the US Congress on the whole, of major party presidential platforms, and so on.⁸¹ So, an antiwar position must be a revolutionary one.

⁸¹ Rinaldo Walcott has written pointedly about the effects of reformist campaigns in the context of Canadian multiculturalism in "The End of Diversity," *Public Cultures* 31.2 (2019) 393-408.

Moreover, speculation allows for a broader conception of what it means to be antiwar as such. Unlike the literary objects I examined in the first two chapters of this dissertation, which were historically situated against *specific* US wars, the novels that are the subjects of this chapter are not constrained by realism or a fixed historical moment. *American War* is able to take aim, from the moment of the title, against the entire history of US militarism. *The Fifth Season*, while, I would argue, maintaining a US-centric context, takes as its target antiblackness *and* anthropocentrism.

Though undeniably violent, the rift of a purposeful apocalypse—unlike the bombing of Hiroshima, which was developed, carried out, and messaged via the war logics of whiteness—is antiwar in nature. Its antiwar logic is a minoritarian one, in Muñoz and Chambers-Leston’s terms, and more specifically a queer Black way of understanding *how to be against war, if to live in the world is to be besieged and constantly under fire*.⁸² The antiwar position, then, would advocate for the end of this world. This is a fundamentally different relation to war than the antiwar position of activists at the Washington DC protests who performed and/or witnessed the VVAW’s Dewey Canyon III demonstration. The VVAW, while gaining their antiwar perspective by virtue of experience in the environment of the warzone, were placed there as state agents of whiteness. The antiwar logic I have traced in *American War* and *The Fifth Season* also differs in key respects from the (white, male) queer disavowal of disavowal at play in *Common Place*.

Importantly, the feeling that is solicited from the reader of *American War* and *The Fifth Season* is not a directly mimetic one; the novels are not literary instruction manuals advocating for the release of a bioweapon or the creation of a tectonic rift. Instead, speculation acts as a figure for

⁸² “Our life is a war, and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country, ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction,” the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* narrates at the beginning of this classic work of African American literature.

revolution⁸³ in the novels, allowing readers to feel what ending the current social order (endless civil war for Sarat, endless racist oppression for Alabaster and Syenite) to make room for a new one might feel like. Through the reading experience, the feelings that lead Sarat, Alabaster, and Syenite to *want* an apocalypse are made to seem inevitable and their application to life in the US, past and present, is made plain.

The poem “summer, somewhere” by Danez Smith, excerpted in an epigraph for this chapter, envisions a world of safety and something like *joie de vivre* for Black people who have been killed by the state. Writes poet Rachel Edelman in an entry on Smith’s poem for her blog series “Imagining the Anthropocene,” “Smith imagines these boys in a haven, away from the world that has killed them. And yet, this is no ethereal heaven—they remain in a terrestrial landscape, connecting black humanity to the earth.”⁸⁴ Perhaps, even though the novels this chapter has engaged with do not describe for their readers any details of potential life after the rift/plague, a world such as Smith’s is imagined by Sarat in *American War* and in *The Fifth Season* by Alabaster and Syenite, if only in the promise of an end to the violence of this one.

⁸³ The “consciousness of exploding the continuum of history is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action.”: Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, *Marxists.org* (1940) XV. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

⁸⁴ Rachel Edelman, “Imagining the Anthropocene: Danez Smith’s ‘summer, somewhere,’” *The Ploughshares Blog at Emerson College* (22 Aug. 2017). <https://blog.pshares.org/imagining-the-anthropocene-danez-smiths-summer-somewhere/>.

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ABSTRACT**ANTIWAR LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1945**

by

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This dissertation examines literary resistance to US militarism since 1945. I maintain that a requirement of antiwar literature is a disruption or break from the pro-war narrative that seeks to justify and normalize the wars and militarism that saturate this historical period; literary works about war that do not deviate from this narrative are simply war literature. In chapters on John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), poetry and performance protests of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (1970-72), Rob Halpern's *Common Place* (2015), and works of speculative fiction by Omar El Akkad (*American War*, 2017) and N.K. Jemisin (*The Fifth Season*, 2015), I argue that we cannot understand the specific formal principles at work in antiwar texts unless we account for the ways in which those practices are motivated to contest given pro-war ideologies and structures of feelings or to inspire or sustain antiwar practices. This motivation is conveyed in a range of ways, attuned to historical context and generic affordances, and explicating these various methods of literarily representing an antiwar position and antiwar sentiment across different wars and via different literary genres produces a broader sense of what a political work of literature could be expected to do throughout this period of US history.

In my examination of US literature since 1945 through the lens of antiwar literature, I reached the following historical and theoretical conclusions. The historical conclusion is that in the period of time from the end of the Second World War (1945) to the first two decades of the 21st century, US antiwar literature has demonstrated a continuing disenchantment with national politics alongside a skepticism about what literature does or can do in terms of political formation through aesthetic experience. The theoretical conclusion that my analysis in each chapter supports is that to be antiwar as a political position also requires the critique of the nation-state as a form and of state ideological formations around race, gender, and sexuality.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Kelly Roy Polasek received her bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature with a minor in Latin from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (2011), her master's degree in English from Wayne State University (2017) and her Ph.D. in English from Wayne State University (2021). She held the DeRoy Doctoral Fellowship from 2015-2016 and was Managing Editor of *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* from 2017-2019. As Co-President of the Visual Culture Student Group, she organized the annual Visual Culture Graduate Symposium at Wayne State University from 2017-2020. Her research interests include 20th and 21st century American literature; war and antiwar literature; aesthetic theory; critical theory; African American literature; visual culture; and gender, sexuality, and women's studies.