Understanding a War That Is Not a War: A Review Essay

Writing in 1944 in occupied France, Gertrude Stein observed: “It is funny about wars, they ought to be different but they are not” (1945, 11). Exactly what she meant to convey, I am still not completely certain. But it is this very uncertainty, accentuated by Stein’s disquieting refusal to directly consider the war beyond its effects on her “habits” of daily life, that makes this phrase so plangent (Olson 2003, 341). It throws into relief how our judgments about war, and about those who mediate war’s distortions of daily life, are as fraught and open to critical contention as are Stein herself, her writings, and her actions. To consider the meaning of her phrase—wars ought to be different, but they are not—the questions that it raises, and the habits of understanding it disturbs, is one mode of reading eight recent texts about war, violence, and security.

By comparing these texts—Maria Stern’s Naming Security—Constructing Identity (2005), Arjun Appadurai’s Fear of Small Numbers (2006), Rey Chow’s The Age of the World Target (2006), Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel’s (En)Gendering the War on Terror (2006), Sarah Husain’s Voices of Resistance (2006b), Sally Engle Merry’s Human Rights and Gender Violence (2006), Laura Sjoberg’s Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq (2006), and Kristian Williams’s American Methods (2006)—we learn not only that war is constituted in and by differences but also that these same differences exceed the institutions and practices they call into being. We

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1 Stein’s wartime actions and writings raise a host of interpretive challenges, particularly because of their apparent amorality. Although an American Jew and a lesbian, Stein was also a Nazi sympathizer who tried to nominate Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize (Weber 1997). I recognize that invoking Stein in all her complications, which in part arise from her writings and her actions in regard to World War II, is a rather curious move. I do so not to decide the detailed debate over the meaning of these writings and actions but to make explicit how our judgments about war, violence, and security—and the actions individuals take to mediate each—are as deeply complicated as they are necessary.

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also discover another way to read Stein’s phrase: as transcending the wars (namely, World War I and World War II) to which it refers. The iterative structure of that phrase illuminates not only the difference between wars today and wars in the past, and the difference between war and peace, but also the war on terror as a war that is different from war itself, one that defines its exceptionality by differentiating itself from the very category to which it claims to belong. Stein’s phrase thus exemplifies the interminable comparisons that are needed today to think through the war on terror, to think through the impossible but necessary peace that is its real opposite. Anything less, I suggest, risks the “elimination of difference itself” that Appadurai deems the “hallmark” of the present war (2006, 11).

These texts collectively suggest that the war on terror is indeed constituted in and by its differences—not only its differences from the war of which Stein first wrote but also the differences that make the institutions and practices of war itself possible and intelligible. That war is, as Carl Schmitt argues, the exemplary situation for differentiating between friend and enemy, of course, is not lost on President George W. Bush (Schmitt 1996, 26). Bush’s assertion that “you are either with us or you are against us” (2001c) has conjured a seemingly innumerable set of oppositions (e.g., civilized vs. barbarian, lawful vs. unlawful, innocent vs. guilty, combatant vs. terrorist, etc.) in accordance with which the war on terror proceeds. More paradoxical, perhaps, is the claim that the war on terror is at once analogous to and completely different from past wars, such as the first world wars, especially World War II, and to a lesser degree the Cold War.

The United States is engaged in a “new kind” of war, one like no other (Bush 2001c). Unlike past wars among and within sovereign states, this is a war against terror, abstract noun though terror may be, that promises to be of infinite duration. It “will not end until every terrorist group has been found, stopped, and defeated” (Bush 2001a). In so defining this war—as against terror, like no other, without precedent, of infinite duration, against every terrorist group, and for democracy and rights—President Bush and his administration not only attempt to constitute the intelligibility of this particular war but also establish its practical strategies and its potential targets. The difference of this war on terror from prior

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[2] President Bush repeated this statement on November 6, 2001, and it is the concept that opens the 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (White House 2003, 1). The global war on terror is also described by the U.S. military as the long war, a generational war, of infinite justice, and of enduring freedom. The prospect of indefinite detention for those captured in the war on terror is one consequential effect of crafting the war on terror in such a way.
wars is determined by the definition of the assumed enemy, “shadowy networks” (National Security Council 2002) of “bad people” who “kill Americans” (Rumsfeld 2006) and, according to President Bush and his administration, “violate every rule and norm developed over the history of war” (Yoo 2006, 23). The enemy is not a proper enemy, and so the war against this enemy cannot be a proper war. It is a war that establishes its identity by defining its difference from war itself; it is a “war by other means” (Yoo 2006), the otherness of which is demanded by the otherness of the enemy.3

Unsurprisingly, then, none of the targets of this war—terror, terrorists, and terrorism—have coherent or fixed coordinates.4 There is little doubt that terror is not merely a metonym for a tactic (terrorism) whereby terror not only stands in as a tactic of terrorism but becomes what terrorists “do” and what terrorism “is,” while both, in turn, define the difference between us and them, between the West and the rest. Terror also functions as a metonym by eliding this process into one term. It erases how, perhaps more precisely, terror is also an emotion or experience. What are the effects of turning terror into the object of such a forcefully self-righteous military campaign? How exactly does one target terror when as an emotion or experience it is refracted throughout daily life? As Manuela, one of the Guatemalan women Stern interviewed about their negotiations of self, identity, and security during the Guatemalan civil war, recounts, “My house . . . is not an island, so it received all the influence . . . of constant

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4 Terrorism is defined as an instrument, a tool, or a strategy and according to U.S. policy as a “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents” (White House 2003, 1). These definitions do not remain distinct from normative verdicts pronounced by President Bush and his administration. Terrorism, putatively an instrumental strategy, becomes in his words “evil . . . stealth and deceit and murder” (National Security Council 2002, 5). Terrorism is no simple instrument, it is instead a psychopathology, embodied in the actions of evildoers—a necessary turn, for embodiment allows for eradication by extermination. It should not surprise us then that the U.S. military in Iraq refers to its presence as an “antibody in their society” (Gordon and Trainor 2006, 163). Pathology resonates with past discursive constructions of national threats as cancer and finds an international resonance with, for example, Guatemalan President Efrain Rios Montt’s description of the Guatemalan insurgency as a sickness to be destroyed. This link is significant if, as Greg Grandin persuasively argues, it is in Guatemala that the United States exercised its most brutal imperial power. He writes, “To make the point as crudely as possible, the conception of democracy now being prescribed as the most effective weapon in the war on terrorism is itself largely, at least in Latin America, a product of terror” (2004, xv). See Stern (2005) on these points as well as Diane Nelson (1999) and Grandin (2000).
terror” (Stern 2005, 75). Thus, the fear of which Manuela speaks, occurring in a civil war almost two decades ago but one that nevertheless presages the tactics, techniques, and terror of the ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, becomes one of the perverse results of any attempt to turn terror into an object, and an object of such condemnation.6

Condemnation, in Judith Butler’s terms, “becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other whom we then condemn” (2005, 46). Witness President Bush condemning the Taliban as “barbaric in their indefensible meting of justice” to justify bombing Afghanistan as the first part of Operation Infinite Justice (later renamed Enduring Freedom; Bush 2001d). The point is not simply the hypocrisy of such a justification or the practical futility of efforts to exchange one form of injustice for another in the pursuit of justice. It is that condemnations of this type work at cross-purposes to “self-knowledge” (Butler 2005, 46) and that the war on terror gains some of its urgency by disavowing its own complicity in and even dependence on the terror it claims to oppose.

One way to understand what President Bush and his administration mean by the war on terror is to deduce that meaning from the events they name as war. These events include not only the more conventional ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but also wars that have yet to be, but presumably shall be, fought in self-defense. Self-defense here becomes an all-inclusive category. It no longer refers only to the traditional understanding of self-defense in response to an armed attack as defined by Article 51 of the UN Charter but now, as defined by the expansive U.S. doctrine of preemption, refers to an “anticipatory action” in spite of “uncertainty . . . as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack” (National Security Council 2002, 15).7 This expansive definition of self-defense is extended yet further to include aggressive actions against U.S. domestic laws, which are taken to interfere with executive power to wage war. Thus,  

5 Stern’s informants are listed by their first names only.

6 The poet Nguyet Tu further suggests how terror marks the quotidian: “Behind your back, a rag of flowered bridal gown— / A sister’s, an aunt’s, a fellow villager’s / First intimate touch of happiness, / Terror bursting down / Splattering corpses in the sand” (2003, 163).

7 Article 51 of the UN Charter states that “nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security” (United Nations 1945). In contrast, the 2002 National Security Council states, “The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack” (2002, 15).
the original 2001 USA PATRIOT Act contravened domestic laws when necessary to “detect terrorist cells, disrupt terrorist plots, and save American lives” (White House 2006), and the 2006 Military Commissions Act establishes procedures to interrogate and try “alien, unlawful enemy combatants.”8 In ways that vary markedly from constitutional precedents and with confusion as to the coordinates of the target, these attempts at self-defense become examples of self-attack. Confusion of this type helps us understand why claims advanced by President Bush and his administration so often evince a palpable nostalgia for a past in which war possessed its own clarity and coherence in principle and in practice. This nostalgia is particularly insidious, for it creates a false contrast in which the supposed purity of purpose of past wars—for democracy and against totalitarianism, for example—is used to legitimate the war on terror while designating the presumably unique dangers of the war on terror. Again and again, President Bush and his administration quote the laws and discourse of war while at the same time maintaining the prerogative to exempt themselves from those laws.9 To wage a war that is not a proper war against an enemy who is not a proper enemy is to lay claim to an executive dispensation from international and domestic laws that traditionally govern war and to arrogate the power to transform the tenets of international and domestic law in the process.

Given this confusion, perhaps we misread Stein if we take her to refer to the differences between wars. Perhaps the difference to which she refers is the difference between war and peace, a distinction elided as war becomes routinized and normalized as everyday life and ceases to be an extraordinary event (which is one way in which Stein is read). To use Appadurai’s phrase, employed in his critical analysis of globalization, the war on terror has become a “quotidian war” (2006, 31). The purpose of the war on terror, in this interpretation, is not military victory; it is to make possible and intelligible a social order, and thus even a peace, that is itself a “coded war” (Foucault 2003, 51). War ought to be different


9 At this juncture, I recognize that the concepts of exceptionality and state of exception are at risk of becoming a single heuristic with which to analyze the actions of President Bush and his administration. My use of exceptionality first reflects President Bush’s own description of the global war on terror, but it is equally informed by the complexity and sophistication of analyses provided by, among others, Frédéric Megret (2002), Butler (2004), and Adam Sitze (2007).
from peace, but it is not. It is odd that in his analysis of globalization and its effects, Appadurai holds that it is only the war on terror that shattered “our two most cherished assumptions—that peace is the natural marker of social order and that the nation-state is the natural guarantor and container of such order” (2006, 33). I would think that colonial governance and imperial rule had decisively dispelled these assumptions. What strange admixture of complacency and historical ignorance sustains the belief that peace is the natural social order and that the nation-state is the natural guarantor of such order?

Chow’s critique of the development of area studies following World War II provides one response: ignorance—of oneself or of history—is a privilege, a form of institutionally sanctioned immunity: “That alibi—of not having enough time or not being available to know everything—is precisely the heart of the matter here because it is, shall we say, a one-way privilege” (Chow 2006, 13). As in the case of Manuela, the violence of war saturates the intimacies of self and family so thoroughly that alibis are unthinkable. To refuse to grapple with the implications that follow from this recognition is itself a reminder of the differences war demands and determines. Jawahara K. Saidullah, who traces her own identity as a Muslim woman through her experiences of war and dislocation, elaborates thusly: “I was a suspect, a violent terrorist, even in my own eyes. This is what the outside world told me” (2006, 190). In this way, war is not solely what occurs outside of the self; rather, as Saidullah emphasizes, “War is what lives within me . . . remains the constant backdrop of my life” (195).

If it is at the same time a war and not a war, what then is this war on terror? Husain’s edited volume (in which Saidullah’s essay appears) addresses Muslim women’s struggles with faith, war, sexuality, and their paradoxical status as both insiders and outsiders in the multiple communities—feminist, women of color, Muslim, and lesbian—which they are both a part of and yet distant from. Could it be, as she holds, that “there is nothing terribly new” about this war’s strategies and its violence (Husain 2006a, 11)? Is the war on terror better identified as an extension of what Appadurai names the “superviolence” (2006, 1) of the past decade, what Williams calls the institutionalized “repressive apparatus” (2006, 169) of state power, and what Alfred W. McCoy terms “manifestations of a long history” (2006, 7)? Without disputing the insights gained from these authors’ careful historicizing of the logic and techniques of the war on terror, is there a risk in coming too quickly, too completely, to this sort of a conclusion? What is neglected if the differences of this war are not detailed and if its scope remains undistinguished? Put another
way, if we fail to inquire whether the war on terror is different—how, for whom, to what degree, and with what results—would we not also fail to account for the very particularities of this war, of its violence and our own implication in it?

By raising questions that institute the war on terror as the ostensible point of comparison and thus set the referential terms of exchange, I am well aware of my initial complicity in what Chow describes as the Eurocentric “hierarchizing frame of comparison” (2006, 80). It not an enumerative exercise of equivalence that I imagine, however, but an analysis attuned to the “politics of comparison” (81). That is, comparison often presumes a universal standard or commensurability that, insofar as it seeks to establish similarities and differences, results in (because it is ultimately implicitly predicated upon) a totalizing taxonomy. This taxonomy undermines the acknowledgment of difference—or what remains in excess. It is for this reason that Chow depicts such efforts as narcissistically self-referential. Nevertheless, as she acknowledges, the work of Michel Foucault implies new possibilities for comparison by demonstrating how such “taxonomic assurance” (Chow 2006, 81) or “certitudes” (80) are neither sure nor certain. Thus, Chow notes, “as much as it is inevitable . . . comparison would also be an unfinalizable event because its meanings have to be repeatedly negotiated—not merely on the basis of the constantly increasing quantity of materials involved but more importantly on the basis of the partialities, anachronisms, and disappearances that have been inscribed over time on such materials’ seemingly positivistic existences” (81). Considered collectively, in other words, these eight texts return to fracture the “hierarchizing frame” of the war on terror at first introduced to order this review (80).

There is much to be gained from turning these texts over and against one another, juxtaposing and puzzling out their similarities and differences, and examining them as a whole. To begin, all these books were completed after the bombing of the Twin Towers in September of 2001 and, in some way, have to be read in relation to it, although it would be to their detriment if each was read only through that event. Likewise, it would be a mistake to read them as evidence for the veracity of Stein’s remark, for that is not at stake. These works should be read, like Stein’s comment, for their multifaceted criticisms and complications of any singular interpretation of war and its violence.

Although I do not wish to overstate their similarities, each book challenges commonplace conceptions and interpretations of war and its violence through at least two classical critical moves. First, each deconstructs the histories and events said to compose war in its specificity, for example,
the Guatemalan civil war, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first and second Iraqi wars, the civil wars of the 1990s, and the present war on terror.

Chow opens her analysis of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by situating her knowledge of these events vis-à-vis her own childhood among Chinese survivors of the Japanese 1937–45 invasion. For her, this dislocation illuminates the atomic bombs as decisive acts of war and of violence but also as reflective of a certain “epistemic event”—that is, how the world-as-picture became equally, supplementing Martin Heidegger, the world-as-target (Chow 2006, 26). Quoting former U.S. Undersecretary of Defense William J. Perry, Chow writes, “Once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it” (31). The bombings’ spectacular results affect more than assessments of war and of peace. As the bombings striated the “organization, production, and circulation of knowledge,” so too does the ontopolitical logic that produced the bombs now return to structure the pursuit of knowledge, especially as taken in the form of area studies (33). The predominance of such logic alters our comprehension of war and of peace and of ourselves by transforming difference into the other, into a target to be found, sighted, and destroyed. Difference becomes substantive when it is made into or embodied as other.

Stern’s book, which considers the civil war in which more than two hundred thousand Guatemalans were killed, is motivated by dissonance as well. This dissonance derives from the fact that the experiences of Mayan women in the civil war—the very experiences that testify to the central preoccupations of war, violence, and security in the discipline of international relations—rarely figure into the studies of this war and corresponding theories of security. How could what was done to Mayan women and what Mayan women did in the pursuit of security be so easily obscured? After all, Mayan women bore an equal measure of three decades—from the 1970s to the 1990s—of extensive brutal repression waged by the Guatemalan state against popular, indigenous movements in the name of state security and also as one front of the U.S.-led war against the Cold War threat of communism. Moreover, it was Mayan women who successfully organized in a range of political and social organizations in response to and against such constant oppression. What sort of disciplinary illiteracy prevents their life stories and personal narratives from acceptance as “valid texts of global politics” (Stern 2005, 56)? A contributor to Husain’s volume, asks a similar question: “What will they say years from now? / What will they know / the countless stories that soak into earth quickly / seep and go missing into smoke and chaos? / The stories of war not in the headlines / but caked in the fingernails of those passed
Will they remember . . . / will they remember this history?” (S. N. 2006, 91–92).

Hunt and Rygiel explicitly refer to Cynthia Enloe’s elegant concept of feminist curiosity to describe their efforts to interrupt conventional war stories, to name the politics that invest those stories with coherence, and as a result to reconsider the stories that are told (Enloe 2000; Hunt and Rygiel 2006, 9). In agreement with Stern’s argument regarding the disruptive significance of personal testimonies by Mayan women, and with those of the contributors to the Hussein volume who narrate their own resistance, Hunt and Rygiel also illustrate how women’s stories challenge and rewrite official war stories and how, in fact, the claim of one “official War Story is made possible precisely because it depends on these gender tropes going unnoticed or becoming naturalized” (2006, 4–5). In fact, it is particularly crucial for women to challenge and rewrite official war stories when women’s stories and gendered tropes are ostensibly mobilized on behalf of women themselves.

As many commentators have observed, President Bush and his administration deploy the rhetoric of women’s rights and women’s liberties to distinguish themselves from those whom they target, to justify the ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now to appropriate the putative emancipation of Afghan and Iraqi women as evidence of their victories. President Bush and his administration, along with Laura Bush, promised to end the “waking nightmare” for Afghan women and their children and enable them once more to “laugh . . . loudly” (Bush 2001d). And so it is that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s invaluable insight once again proves its truth: the war on terror is yet another instance of the imperial impulse to espouse “the woman as an object of protection from her own kind,” to justify the concerted efforts of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1988, 296).

Hunt refers to this maneuvering on the part of the Bush administration as “embedded feminism” (2006, 53). Its presence in the Bush administration’s official war story distracts from the detailed empirical evidence documenting that Iraqi and Afghan women are not emancipated from the violence and insecurity of their lives and that the dissolution of governance in Iraq and Afghanistan has instead exacerbated both. Most ironically, considering the claim of President Bush and his administration to have liberated Afghan women from the burka, women in Iraq and Afghanistan are now forced to wear the hijab or burka not in response to government mandates but for their own safety. Islamic women in the United States and Europe, in contrast, often cannot veil when they wish to do so—illustrating that their freedom to decide is no less precarious.
(Basarudin, Mohammed, and Shaikh 2006, 143–45; Basarudin and Shaikh 2006, 31, 35; Freedman 2006, 170). The complicated, deeply entangled meanings of the veil—its presence or absence in relation to colonial, imperial, or nationalist rule; its recurring fascination for the West; its relation to techniques of aggression and pacification; its significance for the “scopic regime of modernity” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 108); and its importance in relations of targeting—at once convey the colonial histories intrinsic to this war on terror and suggest what transcends both colonial histories and the war on terror.

For women in Iraq and Afghanistan, their political situation is worsened as women’s rights are reduced to nothing more than tools of U.S. imperialism. Consequently, as Hunt underscores, “The war on terror has created an environment in which those who oppose women’s rights are strengthened” (2006, 65). The murder in 2003 of Akila al-Hashimi, one of the three women on the Iraqi Governing Council, is but one brutal manifestation of what Spivak understands as an outcome of a “human rights dependency that can be particularly vicious in its neocolonial consequences if it is the state that is the agency of terror and the Euro-U.S. that is the savior” (2004, 549).

Concurrently, in the United States arguments for ratification of the multilateral treaty on women’s rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), are dismissed as facile. Instead, we are instructed to find recourse in the kind of “muscular humanitarianism” said to have triumphed in Afghanistan (Orford 1999). According to several U.S. senators, the war in Afghanistan proved that “Afghan women were ‘relieved of the burden of an oppressive, anti-woman government’ by ‘the personal heroism and sacrifice’ of American forces, and not through a multilateral treaty such as CEDAW” (Blanchfield 2006, 9, quoting testimony by Senators Jesse Helms, Sam Brownback, and Mike Enzi). Beyond the delusion of Afghan women’s relieved burden, this statement captures what Merry’s work also demonstrates: women’s rights are all too often conceived in terms of paternal relations of protection and benign salvation rather than exercises of agency and sovereignty of women for themselves.

Equally obscured by this naive embedded feminism are decades of complex historical agency and mobilization of Iraqi and Afghan peoples on behalf of those very same rights that President Bush and his administration appear to hold as the exclusive property of the United States (Brodsky 2003). Just as “colonial fantasies” of rule (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 1) were condensed and expressed in the contest between the colonizer and the colonized over who was to govern and gaze upon the women, so too
did President Bush and his administration sternly warn the Taliban that the “days of . . . brutalizing women are drawing to a close,” fantasizing a heroic rescue uninterrupted by the unpredictability, one might say, of the loud laughter of its object (Bush 2001b).¹⁰

By denaturalizing misleadingly familiar war stories, each text under review here reconfigures the very boundaries of war while also documenting how war and its violence draw and depend upon that which has all too often been occluded. At the very least, these efforts expose the falsity of heretofore unremarkable assertions such as that made by the noted military historian John Keegan: “Warfare is, nevertheless, the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart. . . . If warfare is as old as history and as universal as mankind, we must now enter into the supremely important limitation that it is an entirely masculine activity” (1993, 76). But these texts do more than expose such errors. They also generate a reconsideration of the terms by which the past and present are understood and by which the future is imagined, and this is the second classical critical move to which I refer above. As Husain notes, “Our writings began to articulate the experience of growing up in the post–Gulf War United States as Islamic outsiders, living in racist zones where our bodies, our cultures, our desires are spectralized in ‘zones of exception.’ The writings begin connecting histories of migration, memories of ‘home,’ and stories learned growing up in the harems of ‘Muslim’ households to present-day experiences. . . . The legitimating strategies of Western counterterrorism need to be understood in terms of these memories of home” (2006a, 7).

Husain and her contributors are not engaged in a purely corrective reading. Instead, the writings in her collection illuminate how “the historical time that we thought was past turns out to structure the contemporary field with a persistence that gives the lie to history as chronology” (Butler 2004, 54). The point of this displacement (or noncoincidence) of spatial and temporal distinctions—of memories of home and histories of migration—is to sustain a new orientation of knowledge and of identity.

What strikes me is how this displacement is also internal in its scope. As one contributor in Husain’s volume phrases it, “I am the history of the rejection of who I am” (Basarudin, Mohammed, and Shaikh 2006,

¹⁰ See Jacqueline Rose for an analysis of the import of the “revolutionary power of women’s laughter” (1986, 233), the way women’s laughter disturbs (remains in excess of) imaginaries of sexuality and vision. In distinguishing among power, force, strength, and violence, Hannah Arendt makes the point that “the greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt and the surest way to undermine it is laughter” (1970, 45).
There are multiple expressions of this in Stern’s volume as well. Describing her sense of becoming other to herself, Elena, one of the Mayan women quoted, says (even using the third person) that “one could not talk much . . . one had to remain quiet, one could not say what one felt, what one thought, like one was sleeping” (Stern 2005, 92). Drawing on her interviews, Stern concludes, “people were thus removed from the very basis of their own self and those around them” (92), while at the same time their “political identities emerged in relation to what the army was threatening” (78).

Rejection, becoming the other, or being removed from oneself does not negate one’s ability to say, “I am.” Instead, it underscores the treacherous process of claiming “I am”—a process made more difficult not only by the brutality of present violence but also by the violence of the past, which scars well into the future. Norma Alarcón describes this process as “cultural and psychic dismemberment . . . linked to imperialist racist and sexist practices [that are] not a thing of the past” (1999, 67). Speaking to Stern, Rosa recounts, “It was part of the history of the violence that one was not able to forget all that happened” (Stern 2005, 82). In the narratives in Stern’s volume, the struggle to survive requires the momentary erasure of the self, but it is also the struggle to survive that facilitates professions of self. Crucially, the insights expressed in these testimonies of the relationships among violence, survival, and the constitution of the self draw out the more disquieting dimensions of Butler’s argument regarding the relationship of condemnation and self-knowledge.

Our knowledge of ourselves remains elementally abbreviated, Butler avers, if we act as if we can or must ultimately defend against all vulnerability to secure ourselves. She argues that a particular sort of identity and ethics arises from vulnerability, a vulnerability to the very violence that is capable of utterly destroying the self. On what grounds, one might then ask, can one simultaneously allow and yet condemn such violence? Further, can it be that our negotiation of such radical vulnerability protects the other? Can the form that negotiation takes move us from condemnation and, in Chow’s words, away from the mere targeting of the other? To continue in Chow’s terms, does this radical vulnerability restore the other to a constitutive exteriority, disrupting the compulsive self-referentiality of the postatomic pursuit of knowledge? “As long as knowledge is produced in this self-referential manner, as a circuit of targeting or getting the other that ultimately consolidates the omnipotence and omnipresence of the sovereign ‘self’/‘eye’ . . . the other will have no choice but remain just that—a target whose existence justifies only one thing, its destruction by the bomber” (Chow 2006, 41).
If it is possible to imagine withstanding such radical vulnerability at a remove, that is, from the position of distance—and dropping bombs from the air is a canonical example of such distance and remove—could it be too difficult to contemplate such radical vulnerability at moments of immediate and intimate violence? How does one figure such vulnerability in wars that, we are told, incite a particular kind of intimate violence? Appadurai refers to this as “vivisectionist” violence: violence that expects to secure certain knowledge and certain selves through the brutalization of the bodies of others (2006, 89). We would be remiss not to acknowledge that these other forms of war bear equally on the war on terror, particularly civil wars waged by counterinsurgency tactics of which the Guatemalan civil war is perhaps a preeminent example. We would also be remiss not to explore why it is that the analogy to these forms of war—civil wars and wars of insurgency/counterinsurgency—was so vociferously (one might say anxiously) disavowed by President Bush and his administration (Shuster 2006).

Both preemption and counterinsurgency are premised upon a logic of war that works to anticipate potential threats by focusing on each and every individual who, because of the difficulty of distinguishing who is the enemy and who is not, supplants organized armies as the ultimate target. As the architect of France’s counterinsurgency war in Algeria, Colonel Roger Trinquier, asserted, “The battlefield is no longer restricted. It is limitless. . . . The inhabitant in his home is the center of the conflict. Amidst the continuing movement of military actions, he is the stablest element” (1964, 29). In the contemporary war on terror, the mobility of Muslim and Arab men and women is subject to an enforced stabilization through increased surveillance and policing. While the expansion of characteristics said to identify the enemy (in the words of one “traveling while brown” [Sharma 2006, 135]) intensifies to incoherence—as it did in Guatemala until essentially all individuals were suspect. Such efforts reveal what the wars of the past should have already shown us: the distinction between combatant and civilian is always already in danger of disappearing, has been disappeared; it is not, as Appadurai holds, a future possibility (Kinsella 2006).

How “do you go to war inside a country with which we are not actively at war” (Cloud and Jaffe 2004, A4) to defend against attacks we cannot consistently predict and against an enemy we cannot precisely identify, much less, precisely target? Williams suggests that principles and guidelines for counterinsurgency operations are not estranged from the histories of psychological and physical torture supported, refined, and practiced both within and without the United States in documented and undocumented
prisons and in immigration and asylum-related processes such as racial/ethnic profiling, shackling, strip searching, and verbal and physical abuse. He argues that it is only through apprehending these histories that the photos of Iraqi detainees being tortured by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib will come fully into focus. On their own, the photos of Abu Ghraib tell us “almost nothing” (Williams 2006, 1). Approaching the photos solely through the narrative of the war on terror fails, in part because it accepts, in the words of Cofer Black, a former antiterrorism expert with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, that “there was a ‘before’ 9/11 and there was an ‘after’ 9/11”—that is, that incidents of torture are unique to the war on terror and that such practices did not predate 9/11 (quoted in Williams 2006, 119). However, the incidents of torture caught but not contained in the photos of Abu Ghraib are not unique to the war on terror.

The abuse at Abu Ghraib is not unique to global state practices in war and of terror. Similar practices are detailed in the interrogation manuals of the School of the Americas, the U.S. combat training school that provides countercinsurgency training to soldiers, and in training modules used by secret police in a range of countries (e.g., South Africa, Israel, and France; see Grandin 2004; McCoy 2006). It was training by U.S. special forces that facilitated the “industrialized terror” (Grandin 2004, 74) of the Guatemalan civil war, leading to the death of at least one hundred thousand indigenous people and resulting in the horrors of which the Mayan women speak. The abuses of Abu Ghraib are not unique in the war on terror, and they are not unique to the war on terror.

The photos of the ritualistic torture at Abu Ghraib, the ones we have been able to see, stage histories of inequities and of atrocities institutionalized in the structure of the social order—from the family (Charles Grazer, one of the instigators of the violence at Abu Ghraib, allegedly committed at least two counts of domestic violence [Whitfield 2004]) to police, to prisons, and finally to the president and his administration. For Williams, “Rape provides the blueprint for the form that torture takes under our current social order. . . . Rape presents an ideal image of the way torture operates—physically, psychologically, and politically” (2006, 235). The myriad forms of rape, the way that each summons hierarchies of violence and degradation, constitute and convey particular meanings because such inequities are endemic to social order. Rape is a form of exemplary violence. The participation of women in the torture of Abu Ghraib cannot be taken only as evidence, as it often is, of the falsity of inherent maternal pacifism or as testimony to the corrupting influence of the military; it is also evidence that the substitution of women for men
as agents of torture made no substantial difference in the event of torture per se but did inform the particular techniques. Such substitution amplifies the relations of violence that enable such acts, drawing our attention to their immersion in our social order.

How else do we begin to comprehend the tragic forms of pleasure and revulsion easily derived from these photos? Melissa Brittain comments that the photographs of former army reservist Lynndie England, who was charged in connection with her role in the torture practices at Abu Ghraib, are so ubiquitous because they resonate with “certain sexual fantasies” and appeal to “racist fantasies of demasculination of brown and black men” (2006, 89). How else do we start to understand that it was the shock said to be shared by the people of the United States that was itself so shocking to other parts of the world? To others, it was a “confirmation of what they already knew” (91). To return to Chow’s observation, if ignorance is a form of immunity, then the repercussions of Abu Ghraib, no less than the repercussions of the bombings of the Twin Towers, include a loss of immunity, a loss of the disassociation made possible through the privilege of ignorance and the refusal to know. Thus it is not that through the practice of torture we finally become the enemy we fight, as arguments against the practice of torture sometimes assert, a reversal seductive in its clarity. Rather it is that this difference of being with us or against us—the predicate of the war on terror—possesses no absolute substance and maintains no absolute boundaries. Vivisectionist violence, as Appadurai describes it, seeks to “confirm its conjecture” through the “dead, disabled, or deconstructed body of the suspect” (2006, 89). He appears to hold that such violence “always confirms the suspicion of . . . treachery” (89), yet an effect of such violence, of which torture is one technique, is the erosion of any certitude of the treachery of others.11

11 And here, I think, Appadurai’s discussion of both cellular and vertebrate structures in the “morphology of global economy and politics” may both be of use and yet falter slightly. He is right, I believe, to point out that there are distinct forms of organization of global capital and global terror that do not follow the structural hierarchies of vertebrate systems—“premised on a finite set of coordinated, regulative norms and signals . . . certain protocols . . . arrangements between sovereign states, guaranteed by various agreements and treaties” (Appadurai 2006, 26). Yet the cellular form of global capital and global terror, exemplified by diffuse networks of political and social change as well as mobile monies, may not, in fact, be in an antagonistic relation with such vertebrate systems. Extraordinary rendition appears to me to be an example of the symmetry of the two, for while it is indeed a different cellular circulation of capital and of terror, it is also one that derives its authority and efficiency from sovereign states. Can a cellular form survive the demise of its vertebrate system? Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, perhaps Jacques Derrida’s concept of virology and autoimmunity might be of use, although the imbrication of all three concepts (autoimmunity,
Not only does such brutalization not work, failing to fulfill its technical purpose of gaining information, but such brutalization also produces an elemental suspicion of ourselves (McCoy 2006, 203). In this doubled sense, torture fails to produce knowledge of the other or of the self, except of the kind Butler and Chow critique—that is, knowledge that, because it is produced through condemnation and targeting, fails to address its own violent complicities and deformation. Moreover, the very doubt and indeterminacy of the distinction between self and other cannot be, if it is ever, more than momentarily quelled through the brutalization of bodies. This is one of the reasons, as we have witnessed, that targeting in this war on terror grows ever more indiscriminate; it is as if the amassing of bodies (of which the pyramid in the Abu Ghraib photographs is one compelling image) can counter this indeterminacy and doubt.

In this sense, we can find another source of the anxiety of which Appadurai speaks and of the compulsion to interiorize against aggression that Chow describes. For if there is indeed nostalgia on the part of President Bush and his administration for wars analogous to that against the Nazis, this nostalgia is seamed with an anxiety that arises from the war before us. For even as President Bush insists on the distinctions between “us” and “them,” the acts of torture belie such clear certitude, giving rise to anxiety over the distinctions between self and other.

In his explanation of the elements of the war on terror, Appadurai argues that the “surplus of rage” (2006, 10) that marked the violence of the 1990s, from the wars of the former Yugoslavia to the genocide in Rwanda, is yet more dangerous at present because it is marked with an increased “anxiety of incompleteness and unacceptable levels of uncertainty” created through globalization (9). When this anxiety is mobilized, “predatory identities” emerge (51). These predatory identities cause intense degrees of violence precisely to counter the erasure of and uncertainty about the purity of those identities. Minority identities threaten that purity, as “even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole” (53). Chow finds similar logic at work in the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City in 1995: “When anxiety about the United States’ loss of control over its target fields—and by implication its own boundaries—becomes overwhelming, bombing takes as its target the United States itself” (2006, 43).
The “brutality, degradation, and dehumanization” (Appadurai 2006, 11) of recent decades are manifestations of the intensity of this rage, uncertainty, and anxiety, for it is only through these means—brutality, degradation, and dehumanization—that predatory identities are reassured: “Violence can create a macabre form of certainty” (6). The logic of predatory identities presumes that such certainty is finally possible, but the recurrence of war, its terror, and its torture argue against this potential, even if we were to allow that such certainty was desirable. If violence results in a macabre form of certainty of the absolute purity of difference between self and other, then we will remain locked in a recursive circuit of violence among always already intimate enemies.

How, then, are this surplus of rage, the anxiety of incompleteness, and the compulsion to interiorize to be interrupted or mediated? According to Appadurai, the answer lies in an international civil society that counters and pacifies cellular forms of hatred with cellular forms of civility. Merry, drawing on Appadurai, also finds hope in the transnational circulation and domestic translation and implementation of human rights, specifically women’s rights, made possible by international civil societies. This is by no means a false solace, especially in light of the efforts and the success of U.S. judge advocates general in collaboration with international lawyers and activists in bringing the abuses at U.S. military prisons to international attention and censure. And, as Merry underscores, it was the concerted work of an international community of feminist activists that repeatedly forced the United Nations to at least begin to regard gender as integral to its work.

In her reworking of just war theory, Sjoberg offers another way of responding to war and its violence. Using feminist international relations theory as her predicate, she argues that the problem with just war theories as they are now in use is that they lack a common unifying morality that can provide a ground for judgment without “silencing the diverse voices in global politics” (2006, 29). According to Sjoberg, instability in the meanings of justice, and the fact that those meanings are open to multiple interpretations, renders justice an unfit standard or ground by which to answer the defining challenge of just war theorizing—is this a just or unjust war?

Sjoberg first argues that care and justice can be synthesized into a single security ethic and that this single security ethic is, in fact, a form of empathetic cooperation. Empathetic cooperation is a form of “collaborative politics”; it begins with “a process of emotional identification with others’ positions. . . . It encourages a dialogue between diverse others (who now appreciate the opponent’s understanding) to reach a mutually acceptable and mutually deployable understanding of a specific concept or situation” (Sjoberg 2006, 49). Since empathetic cooperation includes contingency
and diversity in its emphasis on relationality, it corrects for any rigidity in the concept of justice. Empathetic cooperation admits of no absolute justice, but it does ensure “relative approximations” (62), in part through its inclusion of “more voices in the decision-making process” (62) and through listening to and being moved by those voices to a “working together” (72). What underlies Sjoberg’s theorizing is a fundamental re-definition of power, from power-over to, drawing from Hannah Arendt, power-with. If the flaws of just war theorizing are as pronounced as Sjoberg suggests, however, I am not convinced that they can be so neatly overcome. In particular, the shift in legitimate authority to wage war from those with power-over to those with power-with cannot be so easily solved by redefinition. Merry’s detailed ethnographic analysis of the complex of actors and sites involved in restructuring relations of international and domestic power institutionalized in sovereign states and multilateral institutions may be of great help to Sjoberg, especially since Merry demonstrates that women’s rights are typically adopted by domestic actors rather than imposed from without. Yet while this shift to power-with might be exemplified in Merry’s analysis of women’s rights, there is a crucial difference. Merry theorizes that the adoption of women’s rights partially relies on the fact that these rights cannot be enforced. For Sjoberg, the move to power-with does not deny authority or the capacity to enforce a decision through military means and insist on compliance with that decision; instead, it highlights the collective negotiation of such a decision. Nevertheless, authority is at odds with power-with, at least according to Arendt, for authority requires “unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey” (1970, 45). But there are more significant points of speculation to be raised.

If feminist empathetic cooperation is the unifying morality for just war theorizing, then what war would not be just? Certain kinds of suffering are either permissible (that is, not a cause for just war) or impermissible (grounds for just war). Who would draw that line, and once it is drawn, how would this avoid becoming a recipe for total war? Moreover, what of the fatigue of empathy and compassion that is such a concern of late? How might the pornography of suffering inform and eclipse the call for empathy or engage it only disingenuously? Would the 2005 listening tour of Karen Hughes, then undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, undertaken at the behest of President Bush to rehabilitate the U.S. image in Muslim countries, not qualify as an exercise of empathy that some, if not all, would read as disingenuous? Finally, by exactly what means does empathy mediate or respond to a surplus of rage and an anxiety
of incompleteness if empathy is, as Sjoberg holds, premised on less distinction between self and other?

To conclude, if it is at the same time a war and not a war, what then is this war on terror? Let me suggest at least three ways these texts may orient us toward further consideration of this question—gender, psychoanalysis, and knowledge.

First, gender discourses remain constitutive of our understanding and knowledge of war. These discourses are so tightly imbricated in and replete with other discourses—sexuality, religion, imperialism, torture, race, rape, visibility, and targeting—that we do ourselves a disservice if we hold to the possibilities of untangling them in their entirety. It is true that sex and sex difference continue to emerge as referents for difference itself, but the substance and meaning of sex and sex difference are subtly altered when, for example, we struggle to comprehend female suicide bombers and the rhetoric of gendered martyrdom in relation to President Bush’s and his administration’s emphasis on the significance of sacrifice.

Second, psychoanalysis has not exhausted its purchase on politics, but there is need to more precisely delineate and explore its contribution. Jacqueline Rose raised the question more than two decades ago: “What could be the purchase of psychoanalysis outside of its own specific domain?” (1986, 2). Answers to this question require more complex and careful distinctions among anger, rage, anxiety, empathy, and fear—gestured toward but never fully developed by Appadurai, Chow, and Sjoberg. What is the distinction between self-righteous anger (which presupposes and posits a completely immune subject, a subject who is uncontaminated by the evil that is condemned) and rage, as one expression of the inability to mourn, and anger, as a recoupable and even admirable mode of subjectivation? What modes of aggression and violence can be allowed? By what means can aggression or violence be expressed?

Third, Chow cautions that even in seeking to understand the differences that underscore and undermine the war on terror, our very pursuit of knowledge all too often returns to the geopolitical “point of origin,” the “eye/I” that is the American state and society, that constructs the “world-as-picture” and makes the “world-as-target” (2006, 14–15). Perhaps then the question to which we now must turn is how to mourn our loss of immunity and accept the revelations of our disillusionment without recourse to differences that must be destroyed, orienting ourselves instead toward a world-in-common.

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