

# Racialized Agents and Villains of the Security State: How African Americans are Interpellated against Muslims and Muslim Americans

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## Abstract

This article examines modern American warfare and policing to draw parallels in the ways that national citizens and foreign nationals are subjected to similar regimes of violence and subjugation and highlight the interrelated oppressions of marginalized groups at home with marginalized groups abroad. It analyzes media representations of people from the Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian (MENASA) regions to further demonstrate the workings of empire. In particular, the US military-industrial complex, in conjunction with the US media industry, has played a pivotal role in creating dangerous post-9/11 stereotypes of MENASA people as ruthless terrorists. Simultaneously, the US media fabricate an organic alliance between African Americans and its security state apparatus, thereby creating discord and disunity between African Americans and Arabs and other Muslim Americans. Against the hegemony of these institutions, how can activists create spectatorial solidarity and unified movements?

## Keywords

South Asia – Central Asia – Middle East – North Africa – African Americans – MENASA – Muslim Americans – Empire – Security State – War on Terror – media representation – new technologies of war

## Introduction

My own experiences of these matters are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. (...) The web of racism, cultural stereotypes,

political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed. (...) The nexus of knowledge and power creating “the Oriental” and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter.<sup>1</sup>

In the four decades since Edward Said wrote his groundbreaking books *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1981), which effectively launched the field of postcolonial studies, not much has changed in the abhorrent representations of people from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) in the Western literary canon and media except the frequency and intensity of these portrayals.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of the post-9/11 terrorist genre in film and television, these portrayals have skyrocketed in numbers and narrowness. Likewise, misrepresentations and censorship in news coverage of people from MENASA have worsened. MENASA people have been predominantly framed as dangerous and insidious enemies of the state who seek to violently destroy US society from within and outside.

These representations have contributed to the polarization of American society by making immigrants from the MENASA regions objects of fear and hatred and subjecting them to discriminatory policies and laws, and acts of violence at home and abroad. As an Afghan-American woman, the vilification of MENASA people, along with its subsequent institutional and real violence, has had a direct impact on me and my communities. Therefore, for me, this critical inquiry and study is not an exclusively academic endeavour.

Drawing on postcolonial, feminist, and media studies that have inspired my own, I adhere to a hybrid methodology that combines critical theory and autoethnography. Such methodology rejects traditional scientific methods that are premised on maintaining a distant and detached position from one’s subject of study. Rather, a critical autoethnographic approach acknowledges that every position and angle of looking is different and unique to the point of view of the viewer and that every study has the potential to transform its subject of study, what anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has coined the “parallax effect”

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27.

2 I use the category “Muslim” as a shorthand to describe people from the MENASA regions who—despite being multiverse in their religiosity or lack thereof and who encompass many other religions besides Islam—have been subjected to Islamophobia, Orientalism, and Eurocentrism of the US security state and its allies. For example, there have been a number of cases of Islamophobic attacks on Sikh Americans across the US. I use the terms interchangeably. I define the security state as any hyper-militarized nation-state that creates a state of insecurity via various methods, including inciting fear of Others in order to justify extrajudicial violence on its own populous and foreign countries. In this article, I primarily refer to the post-9/11 rise of the US security state.

and “cultural activism” respectively.<sup>3</sup> By acknowledging that one’s subjectivity is always implicated within larger social, cultural, historical, and political power structures, the researcher can pursue broad-based social change by exposing and challenging imposed dominant identity formations and representations. Reflexively revealing and being transparent about one’s positionality vis-à-vis one’s embodied knowledge and kinship/community/group affiliations is a key tenet of conducting a holistic and ethical research study. In this article, I will analyze my own family and communities’ subjectivity alongside those outside my own, while critically engaging in content and textual analysis of dominant entertainment and news media. As a Muslim refugee of war, my family, communities, and I have experienced many of the regimes of real and representational violence that I describe and analyze in this article.

The post 9/11 vilification of MENASA people has drawn criticism from an array of artists, activists, and scholars repudiating the production and dissemination of racist portrayals in the news and other media. Less attention has been paid, however, to how these representations solicit and invoke other non-whites, in particular, African Americans, as authenticating and counter-signing these images. As I will demonstrate, the dangerously normative framing of MENASA people as intrinsically terroristic is critically enabled through a fabricated solidarity between whites and African Americans as agents of the security state. This interpellation of African Americans as unquestioning, loyal purveyors of the US Empire erases the history of African Americans as domestic targets of violence of similar security apparatuses, thereby rendering “unwatchable” the interrelated oppressions of marginalized groups at home with marginalized foreign nationals abroad.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the conscription of African Americans as agents of neo-imperialism sets disenfranchised minorities and

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3 Faye Ginsburg, “Native Intelligence: A Short History of Debates on Indigenous Media and Ethnographic Film,” in *Made To Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 237–238.

4 This article was conceived and developed in dialogue with “The Unwatchability of Whiteness: A New Imperative of Representation,” a special volume of *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 4, no. 3 (2018): 235–243. In their introduction, volume editors Celine Parreñas Shimizu, J. Reid Miller, and Richard T. Rodríguez aimed to delink critical race studies from a focus on whiteness and “beyond the ostensibly prevailing force of white-centered mediation” (236) in order to explore racial dynamics and politics between and across different groups of people of colour. I would like to thank the editors of the journal, including Alexandra Chang, for their generous and copious feedback on various iterations of this article, as well as Maryam Parhizkar, who provided invaluable research, and Jerry Miller for encouraging me to write this article in the first place. His insights and thoughtfulness has led to my writing a deeply nuanced analysis of a complex issue that confounds traditional race theory.

marginalized people of colour against one another and negates their multiple situational and ethical affinities.

As I analyze the (absence of) newsreel coverage of military strikes of the MENASA region, these affinities are further impaired by the limited dissemination of these images in US media. Thus, as I note, where recent scholarship has decried the *overcirculation* and “watchability” of images of violent attacks against people of colour,<sup>5</sup> those opposing the fatal militaristic violence against MENASA people contest the *undercirculation* of images of destructive warfare against the people of these regions, that is, how news media is complicit with the government in censoring such violence.<sup>6</sup> Finally—in addition to media analysis and criticism—this study contemplates the complexity of relations between different people of colour communities whose situations, though similar, do not generate an automatic spectatorial solidarity. Instead, this article argues that solidarity must be facilitated through critical and empathic viewership.

### Alliance or Compliance?

As prominent scholar-activists Edward Said, Cornel West, Judith Butler, and Angela Davis, among others, have aptly demonstrated, imperial violence and national violence are intricately linked. The injustices of US foreign policy—including the wars abroad and the injustices of domestic policies at home—benefit the wealthy classes at the expense of subaltern and disempowered people nationally and globally. Be it policing from above, prior criminalization, or subjugation to the carceral state, the oppression of African Americans, other racialized minorities, and people from the MENASA region are interlinked.

Achille Mbembe describes the interrelated oppressions that slavery and colonization inflicted on the bodies of slaves and colonial subjects.<sup>7</sup> While most

5 See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

6 See Jehane Noujaim, dir. and prod., *Control Room* (New York: Noujaim Films, 2004); Wazhmah Osman, “Jamming the Simulacrum: On Drones, Virtual Reality, and Real Wars,” in *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance*, ed. Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink, 348–364 (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1995).

7 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

of Mbembe's sources are historical examples, he also offers insights into the similar regimes of violence to which descendants of slaves and the colonized, namely African Americans and MENASA people, continue to be subjected to today. Taking his analysis of colonization across the "y-axis" (or policing from the air), he explains how the United States has assumed sovereign control over the *skies* of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and Iran among other MENASA countries. Long after ending ground campaigns, the US continues to occupy and terrorize subject populations through the use of weaponized drones, helicopters, and bombers. These aerial military methods are likewise commonplace in policing and surveilling people of colour in cities across the US. Mbembe coined the term "necropolitics" to define the impact of living under the constant threat of real bodily harm: "The various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."<sup>8</sup> Subjecting people to this zombie-like state of vacillation between subjecthood and objecthood, between injury, life, and death, is similar to what Lauren Berlant calls "slow death"<sup>9</sup> and Jasbir Puar calls a "right to maim."<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of necropolitics, be it state-sanctioned injury, slow death, or outright death, is racism and xenophobia. Mbembe, building on Michel Foucault, explains, "racism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower, 'that old sovereign right of death' (...). It is, [Foucault] says, 'the condition for the acceptability of putting to death.'"<sup>11</sup> Claudia Rankine echoes Mbembe's concept of the living dead by providing many instances of how racism functions in America. In her analysis of the devastating psychological and physical effects of racism on people who are routinely subjected to its violence, she writes about "John Henryism," a medical term that researcher Sherman James created to describe the stresses associated with prolonged exposure to racism: "They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure (...) the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend. (...) You take in things you don't want all the time."<sup>12</sup>

8 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40.

9 Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007).

10 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007),.

11 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 17.

12 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 55.

While some activists and scholars recognize these intricately linked oppressions and push for unity between the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Women's March, #MeToo, anti-war, and Muslim Lives Matter movements, others fail to see their intimate and essential correlations. Speaking to a crowd of hundreds of thousands gathered at the Women's March on Washington in 2017, Angela Davis made a brilliantly insightful and inspiring speech about the indissociable connectedness of various movements in the fight against "the supremacy of white male heteropatriarchy."<sup>13</sup> She highlighted the linkages between the struggles of the people involved in movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock Sioux, Flint, and the West Bank and Gaza, pointing out the importance of seeing how our fates are interconnected:

"This is a women's march and this women's march represents the promise of feminism as against the pernicious powers of state violence (...) an inclusive and intersectional feminism that calls upon all of us to join the resistance to racism, to Islamophobia, to anti-Semitism, to misogyny, to capitalist exploitation."<sup>14</sup>

The Women's March of 2017 has become the largest recorded protest in US history, spurring a subsequent 2018 march and a movement that continues to grow and fight overlapping injustices—an exemplar of feminist intersectional politics and solidarity. The organizers deliberately recruited four co-chairs who represented diverse backgrounds, racial groups, and social justice issues. Co-chair Linda Sarsour, a New Yorker from an immigrant Palestinian family, has worked extensively with Black Lives Matter. As director of the Arab American Association of New York, Sarsour organized American Muslims to protest Michael Brown's shooting and formed the "Muslims for Ferguson" campaign. Likewise, Black Lives Matter advocates such as Davis have used their platforms to protest growing post-9/11 attacks on the Muslim American community at home and abroad.<sup>15</sup> Overall there is an accord and a natural overlap of social movements in these activist circles.

13 Davis' speech is available to watch online: "(FULL) Angela Davis SPEAKS at Womens [sic] March in Washington, DC 1-21-2017," Youtube video, 7:01, posted by Marland X, 22 January 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LKQRXYyRn8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LKQRXYyRn8). A transcript is currently available at <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a42337/angela-davis-womens-march-speech-full-transcript/> (accessed 4 January 2019).

14 Angela Davis, "At This Very Challenging Moment in Our History" (speech given at the Women's March on Washington), Washington DC, 21 January 2017.

15 Please see Davis' book *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016) for further information.

Yet outside of activist and public intellectual networks, popular culture reveals disunity between these movements. British-Sri Lankan rapper and artist MIA pointedly criticized this disconnect by asserting that speaking about Muslim Lives Matter is not permitted in the hegemonic American media. She specifically called on African American celebrities and politicians to expand their purview of influence to include Muslim Lives Matter alongside the Black Lives Matter movement:

It's interesting that in America the problem you're allowed to talk about is Black Lives Matter. It's not a new thing to me—it's what Lauryn Hill was saying in the 1990s, or Public Enemy in the 1980s (...). Is Beyoncé or Kendrick Lamar going to say Muslim Lives Matter? Or Syrian Lives Matter? Or this kid in Pakistan matters? That's a more interesting question. And you cannot ask it on a song that's on Apple, you cannot ask it on an American TV programme, you cannot create that tag on Twitter, Michelle Obama is not going to hump you back.<sup>16</sup>

Subsequently, she was lambasted by the media and some Black Lives Matter activists, and also dropped from Afropunk, a popular music festival she was previously scheduled to headline.

Such disunities are evident in recent debates between public intellectual figures Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates. In December 2017 Cornel West received hostile responses from the media and Twittersphere for critiquing Ta-Nehisi Coates as a neoliberal mouthpiece who has naively valorized President Obama and his policies that are injurious to African Americans and others within the reach of US empire. In a *Guardian* article, West raised crucial points when critiquing Coates:

“Coates (...) represents the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible. This wing reaps the benefits of the neoliberal establishment that rewards silences on issues such as Wall Street greed or Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and people (...) any analysis or vision of our world that omits the centrality of Wall Street power, US military policies, and the complex dynamics

16 “Singer MIA Faces Criticism for Comments on Beyoncé and Black Lives Matter,” *The Guardian* (London, UK) 21 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/21/mia-black-lives-matter-comments-beyonce-refugees-criticism>.

of class, gender, and sexuality in black America is too narrow and dangerously misleading.”<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, Ali Mazrui has aptly critiqued Henry Louis Gates’ six-part PBS documentary *The Wonders of the African World* (1999) for contributing to anti-Arab Afrocentrism by suggesting a complacency of Arabs and Africans in the slave trade. In the volatile post-9/11 political climate, where Muslims and Muslim Americans are under attack in the media and in real life, Mazrui sees the focus and timing of Gates’ documentary as not only suspect but irresponsible and dangerous. He explains, “Some of us fear that in your efforts to repair relations between White America and Black America, you may be sowing the seeds of discord between African-Americans and the peoples of the African continent.”<sup>18</sup>

Radical, left, and progressive messages such as West’s critiques of US hegemony are filtered and censored by mainstream networks in the US.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Coates, whose critiques of American democracy range from tempered to celebratory, is regularly invited to speak on primetime talk shows; Gates too has been showered in accolades and invited to speak on the Oprah Winfrey Show and with President Obama at the White House. Their relatively mild commentary on American race relations and policies, in fact, serves to reinforce the American political order. On the other hand, Mazrui’s BBC/PBS documentary, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986) came under attack by its funders in the United States. Lynne Cheney, who was the chairman of the

17 Cornel West, “Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle,” *The Guardian*, 17 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west> (accessed 4 January 2019).

This follows a long line of attempts by the US government to contain Black internationalism. See Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012): xii–xiii.

18 Ali Mazrui, “A Millennium Letter to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Concluding a Dialogue?” *The Black Scholar* 30, no. 1 (2000): 48. See also Henry Louis Gates, “A Preliminary Response to Ali Mazrui’s ‘Preliminary Critique of The Wonders of the African World,’” *West Africa Review* 7, no. 1 (2000): np.

19 See Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (New York: Beacon Press, 2004); Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004); Osman, “Jamming the Simulacrum”; and Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *Mass Communications and American Empire*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) at the time, accused Mazrui's documentary of "anti-Western" bias while *The New York Times* claimed he "divided US audiences."<sup>20</sup>

Certain mainstream films and television dramas not only diminish inter-related anti-black and anti-Muslim objectives but aggressively disavow their connections. Complicit with the aims of the US government, these shows and movies play a pivotal role in creating a post-9/11 terrorist media genre, building on older racist genres that portray people of the MENASA region as appalling caricatures. This increasingly normative framing fabricates an organic alliance between African Americans and the US security state apparatus, thereby creating discord and disunity between African Americans, Arabs, and other Muslim Americans.

### The "War on Terror" Media-Industrial Complex: Fabricators of Hate and Division

American media has a long history of being embedded in the US government's war public relations machine; working in tandem with various intelligence and military institutions.<sup>21</sup> Racist representations of MENASA people began over a century ago, with the beginning of the Hollywood film industry carrying the torch of Colonial European racism.<sup>22</sup> During WWI and WWII, the industry

<sup>20</sup> Martin, Douglas. "Ali Mazrui, Scholar of Africa Who Divided U.S. Audiences, Dies at 81," *The New York Times*, 20 October 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/us/ali-mazrui-scholar-of-africa-who-divided-us-audiences-dies-at-81.html> (accessed 13 January 2019).

<sup>21</sup> See Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, a Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006); Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2012); Schiller, *Mass Communication and American Empire*; Tom Secker and Matthew Alford, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* (North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017) and "Exclusive: Documents Expose How Hollywood Promotes War on Behalf of the Pentagon, CIA, and NSA," Medium, 4 July 2017, <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/exclusive-documents-expose-direct-us-military-intelligence-influence-on-1-800-movies-and-tv-shows-36433107c307>; Daya K. Thussu and Des Freedman, eds., *War and the Media* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003); and Simon Willmetts, *In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema 1941–1979* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008) and Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

was eagerly acquiescent to the US government's propaganda campaigns.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the US Department of Defense created an official agency, the Office of War Information, that controlled which images made it into newsreels.<sup>24</sup> During the Korean War, when the era of televised broadcasts was in its infancy, Hollywood continued to support the dominant government position. The Vietnam War, on the other hand, is often touted as the first and last significant break from the status quo complicity of the US media. Referred to as the first "television war," images of its brutalities were beamed abroad into the living rooms of Americans. Media scholars have argued that this brief window of press freedom, in which reporters were able to bring the horrors of the Vietnam War home to America, is what shifted public opinion against the war.<sup>25</sup> Hollywood was back on the US military bandwagon with the Soviet Afghan war. By the time of the Gulf (or Persian) Wars, the US government managed and controlled the television news by providing daily live coverage from night vision cameras and cameras on bombers, all from a distance. Cultural critics and media scholars have argued that the Gulf Wars were won in the minds of many American precisely because of these new methods deployed to limit the parameters and viewpoints of reporting.<sup>26</sup>

23 For more on this topic, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1990); Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Ralph Donald, *Hollywood Enlists! Propaganda Films of World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

24 Stephen McCreery and Brian Creech, "The Journalistic Value of Emerging Technologies: American Press Reaction to World War II News Reels," *Journalism History* 40, no. 3 (2014): 177–186.

25 See Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (New York: Verso Books, 1994); Ray G. Funkhouser, "The Issues of the Sixties: An Exploratory Study in the Dynamics of Public Opinion," *Public Opinion*, 66 (1973): 942–959; and Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2013). It is important to note that Daniel Hallin's *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (1989), challenges and complicates this conventional narrative that media criticism of the Vietnam War was robust and a defining factor in ending the war. Instead, he meticulously shows how the editorial positions of most American news organizations lagged behind public opinion, overtly supporting the war long after the public had soured on it.

26 See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); L. W. Bennett and David Paletz, *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Hamid Mowlana, George Gerber, and Herbert Schiller (eds.), *Triumph of the Image: The*

In the War on Terror era, the US government actively censors frontline journalism through its use of embedded journalists and prepackaged news, as well as by targeting, striking, and attacking independent journalists, and controlling bombed areas.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Hollywood's propaganda machine has added a new feature to its arsenal of racist representational devices—the casting of African American bodies in the service of the security state against other brown and black bodies. The volatile combination of concealing the true cost of the wars on MENASA countries abroad with a long history of racist representations of MENASA people seriously impairs how they are perceived, and thus has serious consequences.

This latest representational twist also poses dangerous consequences for African American people. In her analysis of post-9/11 African American literature, Erica Edwards points out that the incorporation of African Americans into the imperial anti-terror project requires a post-racial imaginary premised on erasing the history of American racial violence:

If the fiction of a US united against terror calls for the precipitous end of African-American literature as a record of black suffering and national division, the post-9/11 moment might be understood as the uncanny confluence of a collective writerly reinvention of black literature and a state demand for the postracial. (...) The exit route out of the color line canon into an African-American literature of the now is, then, through a second blood-stained gate: agency for imperial antiterror, not victimization by domestic terror, is constitutive of this new African-American literature.<sup>28</sup>

Jared Sexton (whose earlier work Edwards cites) also highlights the dangers of post-9/11 black complicity within the structures of white supremacy, explaining how the valorization of black masculinity—as a means of legitimizing and standing in as state authority—comes at the high cost of actually preserving anti-black social order and disempowerment.<sup>29</sup> What is equally dangerous, I argue, is the ascendance of African Americans into the ranks of the security

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*Media's War in the Persian Gulf* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992); and Philip Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (New York: St. Martins, 1992).

27 Osman, "Jamming the Simulacrum"; Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, "Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq," *Journal of Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010): 59–87.

28 Erica Edwards, "Of Cain and Abel: African American Literature and the Problem of Inheritance After 9/11," *American Literary History* 25, no. 1 (2013): 197.

29 Jared Sexton, *Black Cinema and the Dangers of Policing* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

state apparatus at the cost of further descent and denunciation of Arabs and Muslims in the US and abroad.

Edward Said broke ground in demonstrating how Orientalist tropes and stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs as ruthless lecherous villains permeate Western literature and art.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Jack Shaheen has provided the first comprehensive content and textual analysis of disparaging representations of MENASA people in Hollywood.<sup>31</sup> In studying more than a thousand films with Arab and Muslim characters made between 1896 and 2000, he found that twelve were positive depictions, fifty-two were neutral, and an astounding 936 were negative. After 9/11 these negative portrayals have skyrocketed, giving rise to a whole new genre of terrorist films and television shows—yet it is important to recognize that the cinematic deployment of African Americans as enforcers of the US security state was already in play in the decade prior.

Described by many critics as one of the most racist films towards Arabs, *Rules of Engagement* (2000) features Samuel Jackson as a US Marine colonel on trial for ordering the killing of a group of Yemeni civilians, including women and children.<sup>32</sup> To complete the black and white male buddy film trope, Tommy Lee Jones plays Jackson's fellow Marine lawyer who exonerates him by proving that the civilians, including the children, were worthy of death because they fired first. In *The Siege* (1998), another pre-9/11 film, Arab immigrants-turned-terrorists go on a killing spree by bombing people in New York City, with Denzel Washington playing the investigating FBI special agent. In *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) and its sequel *London Has Fallen* (2016), Morgan Freeman plays the Vice President and Angela Bassett the Secret Service Director. The similarly themed *White House Down* was also released in 2013. Both films imagine a foreign takeover of the White House and the US. Jamie Foxx stars as the US President in *White House Down*.

Although the attacking nation in *Olympus Has Fallen* is North Korea—similar to *Red Dawn* (2012)—the villains of *London Has Fallen* are a Pakistani terrorist group with nefarious and wide-reaching global terrorism plans. In an emotive action-filled scene, the terrorists fire missiles at the president and his entourage, causing their helicopter to crash. Angela Bassett's character is fatally wounded. Before dying she makes an impassioned plea to Gerard Butler, a secret service agent, to find the terrorists and avenge them. Gerard Butler also stars in problematic films *300* (2006) and its sequel *300: Rise of an*

30 Said, *Orientalism*.

31 Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2001).

32 See Sexton, *Black Cinema*.

*Empire* (2014), critiqued for their depictions of Persian people as savages. The film *Unthinkable* (2010), starring Samuel L. Jackson and Carrie-Anne Moss as FBI agents, justifies the use of extreme and extrajudicial torture through the contrivance of the “ticking bomb scenario” popularized by the television program *24* (2001), which first appeared on Fox two months after 9/11 and ran till 2014. Despite its blatant racism, the series was immensely popular with audiences, garnering sixty-eight Emmy nominations and eventually becoming the longest-running espionage television series in the US.

The ticking bomb scenario is a favourite device of torture apologists to justify torture. It presents a doomsday scenario in which a weapon of mass destruction has been activated and the only way to save innocent civilians is to torture the terrorists into admission and submission. Critics of this scenario, including military and law enforcement personnel, have demonstrated the underlying false assumptions and dangers of this line of thinking. Darius Rejali explains that in reality terrorist acts rarely happen in ticking bomb scenarios, and in the rare cases that they might, the efficacy of torture is dubious.<sup>33</sup> According to Rejali, also contrary to popular belief, the history of torture shows that countries such as the US, Britain, and France, who purport to champion human rights, have been at the cutting edge of new torture methods.

Yet in the terrorist film and television show genre, the ticking bomb scenario is commonly used as a plot device to heighten suspense, panic, paranoia, and anxiety in viewers. The protagonist of *24*, an agent of the LA Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) and the FBI, regularly tortures terrorists in countless ticking bomb scenarios, as the show’s producers use real-time split-screen storytelling techniques to further the effect of impending doom. It is also important to note that the African American actor Dennis Haysbert plays the part of a senator who becomes the President of the US, a storyline that foreshadowed Barack Obama’s arc to the presidency.

While films in the post-Obama era come at a time when people think more proactively about racial representation and inclusivity in the media, these efforts still come up short. *Get Out* (2017), which won numerous awards and grossed \$250 million dollars, has received critical acclaim for bringing the discussion of racism against African Americans to a wider public. Despite all the attention, little has been said about how the film has valorized the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The TSA, an agency of the US Department of Homeland Security created in 2001 as a response to the 9/11 attacks, has been critiqued by many activists for its role in profiling Muslims and enforcing the Trump administration’s Muslim Ban at airports. At the

33 Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

conclusion of *Get Out*, the TSA agent saves the day by arriving to rescue his friend in a TSA vehicle. In valorizing the TSA, the film justifies the systems of surveillance that monitor and criminalize black and brown bodies that it is explicitly opposed to, thus undermining its own critiques of whiteness and also making black people complicit in the subjugation of other people of colour.

The even more commercially and critically successful Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018) is also problematic in similar ways. Celebrated for being Marvel's first film with a predominantly black cast and the first Marvel/Disney film with a black superhero, it has been hailed for its positive and complex representations of Africans and African Americans. However, it is the character of white CIA agent Everett Ross who heroically saves both the Black Panther's love interest early on and the Wakandan Empire in the final battle of the film, ignoring the CIA's long history of suppressing democratic movements—and installing dictators friendly to the American Empire—throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

In the original comic books, the Ross character was written as a foil in order to highlight the problematic legacy of colonialism and critique its present-day incarnation, the institutions of the security state.<sup>34</sup> Referring to himself as the “Emperor of Useless White Boys,” in the comic books Ross was the embodiment of an incompetent and racist agent of the security state who is both afraid and fascinated by the black people he has to engage with, often making mistakes and creating problems due to his ignorance.<sup>35</sup> His mission is one of imperialism and social control couched in the rhetoric of development and altruism. In the film version, the complexities of his character reflected in parody and sarcasm are written out of the script, turning Everett Ross into the classic Hollywood spy hero he was meant to critique, albeit not as omnipotent and omniscient as James Bond or Indiana Jones. Likewise, the makers of the film straightwashed the all-female warrior army of Wakanda. A simple flirtation scene between the lesbian warrior couple Ayo and Aneka was ultimately cut out of the film, prompting the creation of the hashtag #LetAyoHaveAGirlfriend from the fanbase. While the film should still be praised for its accomplishments, with these regressive decisions and erasures the producers and writers of the film once again privilege the white straight male gaze.

34 Christopher Priest, *Black Panther: The Complete Collection, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide Inc., 2015).

35 Zack Smith, “Priest on Black Panther, Pt. 2: ‘It’s Not Arrogance, It’s Competence,’” *Newsarama*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.newsarama.com/25506-priest-on-black-panther-pt-2.html> (accessed 4 January 2019).

Working for the security state apparatus both on and off screen provides African Americans with a platform from which to challenge racism and claim equal rights to citizenship premised on saving and protecting the nation-state. Yet this pledge, taken in exchange for basic rights, has come at the cost of subjugating other marginalized groups to regimes of violence and is not always successful. In the wake of World War II, African American veterans did not have equal access to the GI Bill of Rights. Films such as *Mudbound* (2017) and *Glory* (1989) show how African American servicemen sacrificed their lives to protect the nation-state and yet were denied equal rights. This bartering of fidelity to an anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant state for the sake of citizenship also occurs amongst new immigrants and other Americans of colour. During the Democratic National Convention in 2016, the parents of Humayun Khan, a slain Pakistani-American captain in the US army, condemned Donald Trump's Islamophobic statements on the basis of their son's sacrifice, asserting that they "love this country."<sup>36</sup> The ideological message underpinning such rights-based claims is one of advocacy for equal citizenship predicated on serving supposed national interests. This is similar to women and LGBTQ people who use their incorporation as willing subjects into the security state as a premise to fight second-class citizenship—what Jasbir Puar has termed "homonationalism."<sup>37</sup> For racialized Others within the US, accepting the dominant narrative of the Empire is only the first step; serving the imperial project by enforcing its murderous rules and dictates on other marginalized bodies at the risk of sacrificing one's life is also a requirement of patriotic citizenship.

Narratively, the white protagonists of Hollywood and their assimilated, dutiful people-of-colour partners in the battle against global terrorism are recast—in blatant and shameless contrast to reality—as vulnerable victims, thereby displacing guilt and inducing sympathy. This recasting mitigates the violence that the US security state has unleashed on MENASA people, from extrajudicial bombings to indefinite detention and torture. For example, in *Homeland* one of the main (white) protagonists, along with his African American friend and fellow Marine, are captured by al-Qaeda and brutally tortured for eight years in captivity. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while his love interest struggles with mental illness; both are cast as vulnerable and innocent victims of barbaric and savage Muslims abroad. The Academy Award-winning films *The Hurt Locker* (2008), written by an embedded Iraq War journalist, and *American Sniper* (2014), based on the autobiography of an Iraq War veteran,

36 Khizr Khan's full speech can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzkkk-oJ6bo> (accessed 4 January 2019).

37 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

have been critiqued for presenting empathic perspectives of American soldiers at the expense of overshadowing and/or negating the experiences of the Iraqi people. This criticism echoes the broader charges levelled against the practice of embedded journalism. These fictional narrative switches, which flip the victim/protagonist and aggressor/villain roles, temporarily appease the collective American psyche unable to reconcile with knowledge of the United States' current positions on domination and aggression in the global world order.

Whereas Hollywood has been complicit with the US war machine, a series of daring post-9/11 documentaries such as *Dirty Wars* (2013), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), *Road to Guantanamo* (2006), and *Wounds of Waziristan* (2013) have been instrumental in exposing the hand of the US security state abroad. As numerous human rights reports have also documented and demonstrated, the psychological impact of the American War on Terror and its related military actions abroad are devastating to the subjected populations. Whether it is constant drone surveillance, the threat of being bombed, actual bombings, night raids, imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, being debilitated, losing family members, losing livelihoods, or suffering bodily damage, the psychological and physical costs of war are much higher for those on the receiving end of these acts of aggression. I have seen firsthand the impact of torture on my father, Dr. Abdullah Osman, a former psychiatrist who was a prisoner of war during the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan. The physical and emotional suffering that he endured as a result of being subjected to various types of brutal torture and long stretches of solitary confinement has had life-long adverse effects on his and his family's lives. Ever since, he has worked with the International Criminal Court in Hague to try to bring his torturers to justice.

In the terrorist film and television genre, however, the imperial power's own bloodlust, propensity for violence, and sexual incursions are projected back onto the victims, thus doubly victimizing the targeted groups with both real and representational violence. Incidentally, it was revealed that *Homeland* is both former US President Obama's and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's favourite television program. During his presidency Obama deployed more drone attacks on MENASA countries than any other president, earning him the nickname "Drone King." The moniker mimics that of one of *Homeland's* CIA protagonists, "Drone Queen" Carrie Mathison, whose character strongly advocates drone attacks. Against the critical backlash following the release of *American Sniper* (2014), former First Lady Michelle Obama and former Republican Party vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin both publicly came forward to support the film, further illustrating how the hegemonic forces of the government and the corporate media often merge to reinforce and amplify one another's messages and agendas. By blurring fiction and reality,

they dangerously destabilize the capacity of audiences to separate “fictional” portraits from “real”—and therefore actionable—concepts.

In order to have a holistic understanding of how the politics of representation work in the imagination of audiences, we need to take into account the news media as well, because war imagery in the news (whether audiovisual, print, online, or otherwise) operates differently than images of violence in the entertainment industry. Since the news purports to represent the real instead of the fictional, it holds evidentiary power and therefore can serve as a stronger and more dangerous socializing force in shaping people’s perceptions of the world. Yet in reality, the news does not report the real. The mainstream news, like the mainstream entertainment industry, reinforces the dominant narrative and visual lexicon of the military-industrial complex.<sup>38</sup> Newsreel imagery of war conceals and obscures the realities of US foreign policy, including military actions abroad. Via censorship of geopolitics and frontline news coverage, the news bolsters the clichéd stereotypes and racist caricatures of the entertainment industry and thereby reaffirms the protectionist narrative of the “saviour” security state.

The US government’s public relations machine is notorious for what I have called their “technological fetishization of war.”<sup>39</sup> Using new technologies, such as night vision, satellite transmissions, and footage from drones and other weaponized crafts, the government obscures and censors the horrifying realities of war—including civilian casualties—beneath a veneer of long-distance “shock and awe” spectacles: flaring bombs, shooting rockets, and dust clouds of explosions. It is a simulacrum of war, a smoke-and-mirrors spectacle, while the real blood, flesh, and gore are hidden from view.

In press conferences and releases, the government always claims minimal casualties. Human rights activists and journalists have demonstrated the fallacy of the US government’s claims that every new weapon of war is precise and accurate. The government is afraid of the power of uncensored war imagery and visuals, especially those that reveal the aftermath of bombs and missiles exploding. The images and videos released only show the point of detonation, never the aftermath. In fact, the government actively censors frontline journalists by targeting, striking, and attacking independent journalists and controlling bombed areas. In Afghanistan, during the post-9/11 launch of Operation

38 Media corporations, benefiting from war and empire, privilege official narratives. See Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

39 See Osman, “Jamming the Simulacrum.”

Anaconda and Operation Enduring Freedom, the US military bombed *Al Jazeera's* Kabul office along with at least three local news agencies. In 2003, during the Iraq War, US missile strikes targeted and killed an *Al Jazeera* reporter as well as cameramen from Reuters and several local Baghdadi television stations.<sup>40</sup>

### Locating Empathy, Constituting Solidarity

What is the impact of racist media, be it newsreel or fiction, on audiences and spectators? According to the popular film critic Roger Ebert, “movies are machines that generate empathy.”<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, in the case of Arab, Muslim, Central, and South Asians, the terrorist film and television industry has produced the opposite of empathy. Empathy is the basis for building alliances and solidarity between people; through empathy, one grasps the humanity of another as if seeing through their eyes. On a diverse planet comprised of people from many different races, cultures, and nationalities, mass media is the predominant way that people learn about one another across borders and geographically distant places. It creates our view of the world and the worldview of others near and far. It is how we connect (or disconnect) and engage (or disengage) with groups of people different from our own collective experiences and history. As such, empathy, apathy, or xenophobia can be substantively constituted via national and/or global media that cross national boundaries.

The most popular forms of mass media in the US project a hateful Muslim-as-terrorist image of MENASA people nationally and globally. By pumping racist stereotypes into the US cinematic apparatus—often with the help of “uplifted” citizen protagonists of colour—they elicit fear and hatred of Others. Mbembe describes the illogic of Othering:

The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security—this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself.<sup>42</sup>

40 Noujaim, *Control Room*; Osman, “Jamming the Simulacrum.”

41 Steve James, dir. *Life Itself* (New York, NY: Magnolia Pictures, 2014).

42 Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 18.

Thus, instead of constituting empathy and unity between American audiences and international audiences, the US media fosters disidentification and alienation, stripping MENASA people of their humanity and configuring them as unworthy of humanity's embrace.

For so-called "hyphenated" Americans from the MENASA regions—be it Iranian Americans, Pakistani Americans, Arab Americans, Afghan Americans, or others—watching the news and fiction is difficult not only because this dehumanized image of ourselves, which is projected back at us, further alienates us from American society, but because this racist imagery has adverse real-world consequences. Hollywood's history of anti-MENASA propaganda fuels and justifies wars abroad and Islamophobic acts across the US, both of which have spiked to new heights since 9/11.<sup>43</sup> Attacks on Muslim communities, places of worship like mosques, and immigrant neighbourhoods have resulted in beatings, loss of property, and even lives. My own uncles' (now defunct) Afghan restaurant in New York, Bamiyan, was repeatedly vandalized.

It is no wonder that we have stronger reactions to these types of fictional and news media representations than people with little or no exposure to and engagement with the MENASA region. For example, my MENASA family and friends were disturbed by the positive representation of the TSA in *Get Out*. We collectively share the experiences of being subjected to harassment, surveillance, and profiling by US government institutions such as the TSA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and others at airports, in our homes, detention facilities, and offices. For example, award-winning new documentaries such "The Feeling of Being Watched" (2018), "(T)error" (2015), and "Americans on Hold: Profiling, Prejudice, and National Security" (2010) have revealed how these security organizations have been profiling, targeting, and terrorizing MENASA immigrants across the US. My siblings, cousins, other family members, and I have been detained at US airports for long periods of time and subjected to questioning about our trips abroad. Most of my extended family who live outside the US have stopped visiting altogether, either due to the Muslim Ban and/or being traumatized by US Customs and Border Protection and the TSA. Yet most of my non-MENASA family and friends did not register the TSA as an ominous figure and were not perturbed by its positive representation in the film

43 Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults Against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level." Pew Research Center (2017), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

despite the important fact that black Americans too have been surveilled by the TSA.<sup>44</sup>

This is not to say that *Get Out* and *Black Panther* should not be celebrated; they should be. They deserve the accolades, awards, and incredible commercial successes that have been bestowed on them for their groundbreaking approaches to challenging anti-black racism. Rather, my intention is to raise the question of the necessity of valorizing racist institutions of the security state. In the case of *Black Panther*, why rely on the clichéd trope of the white saviour CIA agent? In the case of *Get Out*, did the supporting protagonist need to be an agent of the organization responsible for enforcing Trump's "Muslim Ban" on the people of seven countries—a controversial executive order that the Supreme Court astonishingly upheld. This decision is currently being challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other progressive institutions. The ACLU's deputy legal director Cecillia Wang stated, "Today's decision will go down as one of the worst in Supreme Court history," comparing it to two other notoriously racist rulings, namely the *Korematsu* and *Dred Scott* cases, one which institutionalized the internment of Japanese Americans and the other which denied US citizenship to freed slaves—both of these rulings have since been reversed.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, with the news, for viewers who identify with and/or share a spectatorial position of solidarity with people who are subjects of war violence, it is doubly difficult to maintain a position of distant and detached viewing. For example, despite the US government's efforts to censor the details surrounding dropping the MOAB, or the largest non-nuclear bomb, on Afghanistan, my Afghan American community and I were outraged. In the aftermath of the MOAB bombing, US news outlets only showed a five-second black-and-white long-distance aerial clip of the bombing that the military

44 For example, Simone Browne discusses how black women in particular are among those most targeted by airport surveillance in "What Did TSA Find in Solange's Fro?: Security Theater at the Airport," in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). As the work importantly shows, contemporary surveillance of black citizens is rooted in the histories and legacies of slavery.

45 See American Civil Liberties Union, "Photos: Nationwide Protests Against the Supreme Court's Muslim Ban Decision," 27 June 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrants-rights/photos-nationwide-protests-against-supreme-courts-muslim-ban-decision> (accessed 4 January, 2019) and Cecillia Wang, "Trump's Muslim Ban Repeats the Constitutional Travesty Committed Against Japanese-Americans in World War II," ACLU, 18 December 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention/trumps-muslim-ban-repeats-constitutional> (accessed 5 January 2019).

distributed. The US government claimed there were no civilian casualties and quarantined the entire area.<sup>46</sup> Local and international journalists, as well as Afghan government officials, were fenced out from the impact zone. Due to our own experiential and embodied knowledge, my Afghan American community and I did not need evidence to know the destructive power of these weapons of war. We neither believed the news pundits and government officials here, nor those from our satellite feeds of Afghan television stations there. For those of us who have experienced being bombed, we see the aftermath of an attack in our mind's eye. Real war, as anyone who has experienced it up close knows, is bloody, messy, and horrifying.

From the rockets striking the exterior of our apartment complex, to my grade school being bombed, to shrapnel shattering our balcony windows, to spending days hiding out in my grandmother's basement, I have many vivid memories of war from the multiple coups and battles that led to the full Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. To this day, flaring lights, certain burning smells, and the roaring sound of some airplane engines disturb me. During my most recent post-9/11 research trips, I met and interviewed a new generation of war victims, including many children and adults who have been impacted by US drone strikes and landmine explosions. Although neither drone nor mine victims were the explicit focus of my research trips, there is no avoiding the war-wounded and disabled in Afghanistan. According to UNICEF, with over ten million landmines Afghanistan is one of the most heavily land-mined countries.<sup>47</sup> Afghanistan is also one of the most drone-surveilled countries in the world, but the US government shrouds their drone programs in secrecy, so statistics are harder to find.<sup>48</sup> As such, Afghanistan is home to the victims of some of the oldest as well as the newest weapons of war. Additionally—and contrary to the news reports—I know from having lived in the region that the valleys in the Achin area, where the US government dropped the MOAB, are bustling with life.

As a media scholar and refugee of war, I wonder how war imagery and violence more broadly impacts different groups. Is experiential knowledge a necessary condition for empathy and action? Do you need to be a refugee of

46 The White House, "Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Spicer" (2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/daily-press-briefing-press-secretary-spicer-041317/>; Helene Cooper and Mashal Mujib, "U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 13 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html>.

47 UNICEF, "The Legacy of Land-Mines," <https://www.unicef.org/sowc96/gldmines.htm>

48 Osman, "Jamming the Simulacrum."

war with vivid traumatic memories of being on the receiving end of bombs to feel compassion for the pain of others bombed? Do you need to be African American to feel the pain of the many African American men and women who have been gunned down by police officers across the US? Is being of the same racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, and/or class identity a priori for feeling spectatorial solidarity? How can we extend the reach of spectatorial solidarity to embrace those outside our own identity markers and affiliations?

Studies have shown that images of violence towards marginalized groups and people of colour induce empathy in some cases and its opposite in others. Some studies reveal that people can take a voyeuristic pleasure in watching the suffering of others.<sup>49</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, for example, in his work on images of violence and torture related to the War on Terror, argues that such scenes induce enjoyment in many Americans by unleashing their base id desires and capacities for violence via a misplaced sense of revenge for terrorist acts, such as 9/11.<sup>50</sup> This resonates with Saidiya Hartman's reflections in her work on the archives of slavery, in which she argues that the reproductions of antebellum violence as spectacle often played to the pleasures of white audiences, and questions reproducing such violence in "the afterlife of slavery."<sup>51</sup> In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, with ample documentation on social media of the police killing African Americans, there is a similar disheartening effect. Likewise, Shawn Michelle Smith draws parallels between photographs of lynchings and the photographs from Abu Ghraib, showing a direct connection between domestic anti-black violence at home and US foreign imperial violence:

Just as lynching photographs were taken and circulated for pleasure and the perpetuation of power, reinforcing a white supremacist community of like-minded individuals, the very fact of the Abu Ghraib photographs suggests that the perpetrators felt justified in their actions, and that they assumed an audience of others who would share their views.<sup>52</sup>

If box office success is any indication of an audience's tastes, then indeed the War on Terror films I have described, many of which grossed between 200 and

49 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Mitchell, *Cloning Terror and What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Smith, *From the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

50 Mitchell, *Cloning Terror and What Do Pictures Want?*

51 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 2-114.

52 Smith, *From the Edge of Sight*, 205.

500 million dollars, prove Smith, Hartman, and Mitchell's arguments. Despite receiving negative reviews due to racist content and other filmic deficiencies, the huge popularity of the films I have analyzed in this article speaks to both the polarization of society and people's insatiable appetite for watching the suffering of others. Thus I agree that the overcirculation of images of violence against minority groups can normalize and validate such violence for perpetrators and spectators alike who already hold antipathy towards racialized Others.

### Conclusion

Yet overcirculation is certainly better than undercirculation or complete erasure and censorship. When people have access to visual evidence and information about security state violence at home and abroad, it motivates communities to rise up and mobilize. In the case of dropping the MOAB in Afghanistan, its visual circulation—while horrifying to watch—catalyzed Afghan and Afghan American organizations, including Hambastagi, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), and the Afghan American Artists and Writers Association (AAAWA) to action, and to demand justice.<sup>53</sup> Images of African American people slain on the streets during the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter eras have certainly played a significant role in galvanizing public empathy for these movements. However, the US government has concomitantly learned all too well that televised violence mobilizes people to act and demand change.<sup>54</sup> As a result, news-based televisual violence has been censored by the overlapping interests of the advertising industry, media executives, and the government. For example, since the Vietnam War, the US government has banned the news media from showing the flag-draped coffins of Americans killed in wars. Further the US news-based media is even more censorial when it comes to foreign news, revealing only part of the story. This, in conjunction with the racism of the War on Terror

53 As a member of the AAWA, I spoke on *Democracy Now!* condemning and contextualizing the bombing. Hambastagi [*solidarity* in Persian] and the RAWA are both Afghanistan-based human rights organizations, while the AAWA is an American-based Afghan American cultural, political, and activist organization.

54 See Cumings, *War and Television*; Lynn Spigel, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2004): 235–270; Spigel and Curtin, *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*; Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

entertainment industry, contributes to many white and non-white Americans deeming MENASA people worthy of retribution, violence, and vengeance based on a false sense of threat.

For Edward Said, a strong believer in the principles of secular humanism, everyone deserves access to basic rights—including the right to live a peaceful life—merely by virtue of being human. Unlike the security state wherein citizenship for minority and marginalized populations is *quid pro quo*—that is, contingent on serving the Empire—for Said equal rights for everyone, regardless of race, gender, class, or nationality, is simply inherent to being a human. He also believed that our identity affiliations and markers are dangerous when they become entrenched and dogmatic because we can forget our common humanity and shared history:

It seems to me that unless we emphasize and maximize the spirit of cooperation and humanistic exchange—and here I speak not simply of uninformed delight or amateurish enthusiasm for the exotic, but rather of profound existential commitment and labor on behalf of the other—we are going to end up superficially and stridently banging on the drum for “our” culture in opposition to all others.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, reading racist media critically and oppositionally—against the encoded dominant messages of the text, as Stuart Hall would suggest—is the first step to building spectatorial solidarity.<sup>56</sup> Once we see how the media text, be it news-based or fictional, is inscribed within the broader political economy and infrastructures of empire and power, then realigning alliances and empathies from the “protagonists”—or agents of the state—to the “villains” becomes possible. Spectatorial solidarity ensures that seeing an African American person shot, tasered, beaten, kicked, or choked will elicit the same feelings of empathy as seeing someone from the MENASA region get bombed or tortured on the news or in fictional media. Building spectatorial solidarity is a fundamental step toward building real movements of solidarity.

<sup>55</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*.

<sup>56</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006).

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