I, George E Potter, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:
Global Politics and (Trans)National Arts: Staging the "War on Terror" in New York, London, and Cairo

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Global Politics and (Trans)National Arts:
Staging the “War on Terror” in New York, London, and Cairo

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Abstract

In the post-9/11 era, over a hundred theatric performances exploring the fallout from the “war on terror” have been staged in Cairo, London, and New York. Though never discussed in relation to one another, the works from major cultural centers on three continents provide valuable insights into how people from three cultures have responded to the wars and political policies since 9/11, as well as how they have attempted to form their resistance to those policies.

To explore this, my study begins with a historiography of “terrorism,” exploring the term’s roots in the French Revolution as a means by which to discuss state violence, a use that was standard throughout the nineteenth century. However, during the twentieth century, as the nation-state became the normative structure for political organization, resistance to it—“subnationals,” as they would come to be called in State Department parlance—were redefined as “terrorist.” Therefore, the construction of the United Nations, the development of human rights discourse, and the codification of terrorism laws occurred within the same era of organizing (un)acceptable political behavior.

The next three chapters of the dissertation then undertake examining theatric works within each of the nations under consideration alone. From there, the following five chapters focus on formal or thematic concerns—the political efficacy of musical theater, representations of Afghanistan, the staging of Iraqi voices, stories of soldiers returning from war, and diasporic theater—in cross-cultural analyses, comparing how similar narratives and structures have been used in different cultural contexts to resist both the “war on terror” and local forms of political oppression. The final chapter of the dissertation looks at Naomi Wallace’s theater-making practices, before closely examining her play *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East,*
one of the few American dramas to draw connections between Palestine and Iraq, as well as one of the few plays about the “war on terror” to have been staged in Cairo, London, and New York. Through an examination of these performances, I argue for the necessity of a more intimate form of transnationalism, one that can understand the effects of global political events on the smallest spaces of distant lives, as well as one that resists the underlying systems of oppression, rather than their symptoms. The conclusion then expands on this argument as not only a call for artistic production, but also for scholarly endeavors in a world where artistic production has become more global and diffuse.
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Introduction

Talking About Terrorism

A theatre which makes no contact
with the public is a nonsense.

---Bertolt Brecht

On July 7, 2005, a series of coordinated suicide attacks on London’s public transportation system ripped through the morning rush hour. The attacks were committed by four men, three of British Pakistani descent and one of British Jamaican descent, all angered by Britain’s continued involvement in the Iraq War. Fifty-two people were killed in addition to the bombers, and another seven hundred were injured. These are the commonly reported truths of what has come to be known as the 7/7 attacks in London. But there is also another story. That same day, at the Royal Court Theatre, Robin Soans’ controversial play *Talking to Terrorists* was in the middle of its summer run, complete with posters showing a shadowy figure walking through a Tube tunnel carrying a briefcase. The advertisements managed to bridge the psychological and literal fear of terrorism, showing an image of fear that became all too real on that July morning. Meanwhile, inside the theater, Soans’ play argued for the necessity of overcoming such fears and engaging “terrorist” groups, which were largely—and accurately—portrayed as nationalist militias within the play. As such, the work represented one of few attempts to deconstruct the with-us-or-against-us post-9/11 binary and to understand the structure of national and subnational violence in the modern world. Sadly, in the days after the attack, this was not an argument that most in Britain wanted to hear. Amid public hysteria and rampant misreports, the security alert in Britain was increased to the highest level, and covert armed teams were given shoot-to-kill orders. A member of Scotland Yard’s elite firearms unit S019 even declared, “These units are
trained to deal with any eventuality. Since the London bombs they have been deployed to look at certain people” (“Police”). On July 22, 2005, amidst the public and security hysteria, Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian, was shot seven times in the head at a London Tube station, after another set of bombings had failed to properly detonate on the previous day. Talking to terrorists—or even suspected terrorists—was the last thing the London Metropolitan Police intended to do.

The question of art’s role in public debates, such as that over terrorism and war, is one that has long lingered in artistic and critical circles, though it’s worth remembering what William Carlos Williams once wrote: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” The same could be said of theater. This certainly is what most progressive theater practitioners and scholars would like to believe. Additionally, live performance provides an opportunity for communal engagement and interaction that literary texts and solitary readers do not always aid. However, inevitably, there is always a question of how such events are represented in performance and how that reacts with the surrounding cultural context. Talking to Terrorists displays a response to both of these concerns. The basic idea of the play—that the only way to overcome terrorism is to engage the organizations one is struggling with—is one that should seem clear to a British audience, given the fact that the divisive and violent history in Ireland was not stabilized until Sinn Fein was brought to the table. As a former Secretary of State says in the play, “Tony [Prime Minister Tony Blair] seems to have learned nothing from history. If you want them to change their minds, you have to talk to them. They won’t do it very willingly because they don’t trust you, but yes, you have to talk to terrorists” (Soans 28). While this idea might seem axiomatic—since liquidating resistance movements has rarely worked in human history—it serves as a stark challenge to the with-us-or-
against-us terrorist/nationalist binary that took hold after 9/11, a problem that is acknowledged in
Soans’ play when American and British when Michael, a Foreign Ministry lawyer, justifies
complicity with torture in Uzbekistan is recalled by a former Ambassador (AMB):

MICHAEL: I am not an expert on the U.N. Convention on Torture, but I cannot see we are in material breach of any provision simply by possessing, or indeed using, information obtained under torture, and subsequently passed to us. It does appear that under Article 11 such evidence would be inadmissible in a Court of Law, but that is the only restriction. Arguably we are further distanced by the fact that the material comes to us via the United States. I make no comment on the morality of the case.

AMB: Michael, I have to say a number of prominent international lawyers have told me that the use of such material would be in breach of the Convention.

MICHAEL: There is certainly nothing on the face of the Convention to that…that…that effect, and I’m not sure that I’ve seen anything published which…which…which would, which would confound my point of view. (72-3)

Interestingly, while the play itself contains a number of interviews with people who have committed terrorist acts, the passages with government officials, such as this, tend to involve talking about terrorists, rather than to them. And even this talk disintegrates as the lawyer, Michael, looks for a legal definition, rather than an ethical one, to justify his superiors’ desire to collect and act on the faulty intelligence gained from torture. Furthermore, as the facts from Uzbekistan consistently contradict the official line, Michael’s language staggers as it reaches for more desperate means of justification.¹

¹ I am reminded of watching one of the many White House press briefings during the recent Egyptian revolution. As Press Secretary Robert Gibbs stumbled over his words, my Lebanese roommate asked me, “Why is he having so
The problem with the idea of talking to terrorists, in the end, is that one must first have the language to speak to them, a language dependent on understanding that terrorists largely represent militant nationalist organizations rooted in specific political and economic contexts. However, in the brave new world of the “war on terror,” where al-Qaeda has become the signifier for all terrorist organizations, this is a concept that has been elided by the justification of neoimperial military endeavors. And certainly it was not a message that most desired to hear after the 7/7 attacks. Writing about the show’s Oxford opening months before the play transferred to London on the eve of the attacks, Michael Billington thus described it: “At its highest point, as in the contrapuntal recollections of the Brighton bombing, it also proves that edited memories can achieve the potency of art.” For Billington, the cross-cutting of both terrorist and victims’ memories in the retelling of the Brighton bombing created an exploration of terrorist violence not common in most public discourse. However, critics reviewing the show just after the bombings viewed it through a very different frame. Susannah Clapp wrote that “despite the play's meandering and its apparent neutrality, it's tendentious; you can welcome the denunciation of British imperialism without feeling it's earned its place as a climactic conclusion.” And the most scathing criticism came from Dominic Cavendish’s review filed the night of the attacks, which ended with a stark declaration:

Brought up sharp by events that have brought London into the age of global terror, I'd suggest that writer Robin Soans and director Max Stafford-Clark skew the experience so that we don't have to face these questions: what if terrorists don't want to talk, what if terrorists don't want to listen? ... The implacable, hate-

much trouble speaking: isn't that his job?” The answer, of course, is that, when trying to avoid speaking the truth to questions asked in real time, finding the words becomes a much more difficult prospect.
filled face of terrorism has announced its arrival on these shores again—and I
don't think it's asking for a conversation.”

Ironically, in saying that he doesn’t want to listen to a conversation with terrorists, Cavendish
engages in the exact activity he associates with the terrorists: assuming absolute morality and not
allowing any outside ideas in. What his stance also represents is the most recent ideological step
in the construction of “terrorism”: that which is beyond consideration or debate and which must
be eliminated in order to preserve one’s society.

In theory, theater can provide one means of addressing such a narrow worldview. As will
be discussed throughout this study, however, most theatrical responses to post-9/11 militarism
have addressed the symptomatic aspects of the era—such as the Bush, Blair, and Mubarak
regimes—rather than the structural problems of neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Also, as
many in America are currently learning through the Obama Administration’s expansion of the
Bush Administration’s security state, changing the oil in a car with a broken transmission can
only take one so far. *Talking to Terrorists* did attempt to speak across the inherited framework,
but, unfortunately, it took the stage at a moment in history when no one wanted to hear its
message, which also happened to be a moment when its message most needed to be heard.

*Talking to Terrorists* is one of over one hundred theatrical works from Cairo, London, and
New York that deal with the amalgamation of political and military policy that has become
known as the “war on terror.” Though never discussed in relation to one another, the works from
these major cultural centers on three continents provide valuable insights into how people from

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2 Because *Talking to Terrorists*, tellingly, hasn’t had a major New York production, there is not the same volume of
critical responses to the play in the United States. However, conservative commentator Debbie Schlussel comically
responded by writing, “The [Boston] Globe writes about two new ‘documentary plays’ (how the heck can a play be
a documentary?) that humanize the terrorists…Soans’ theatrical presentation is an utter outrage.” She concludes,
“Nauseating. Time to cancel this London terror-apologist playwright’s visa and put him on the no-fly list.”
Schlussel’s response is among the more extreme published responses to Soans’ work, though it seems fair to ask if
this kind of response moved closer to the center of the American public’s analysis of “terrorism” after 9/11.
three cultures have responded to the wars and political policy since 9/11, as well as how they have attempted to form their resistance to those policies. With these facts in mind, this study brings these works together for the first time in order to examine how theater artists in Cairo, London, and New York have attempted to document, define, and, in some cases, resist the events and politics of the post-9/11 era, and how many of their artistic representations actually reinforce the dominant political structures of militarism and neoliberal globalization that they intend to critique.

Toward this end, I attempt to place these works within an international context, not only of political and economic development, but also of artistic response in order to create a triangulation of artistic formations that question both the local and the international aims of theatrical production, while also examining a range of possibilities. While some of the works in this study have been addressed in previous scholarship, particularly Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*, most have been explored only in relation to their individual authors and not in an international or comparative context. In fact, the international discussion on both the Hare and Kushner plays has largely focused on comparisons of their New York and London productions, rather than the international political and ideological debates they engage. Many other plays come from lesser known artists and productions, and some are from Egypt. Sadly, the realm of English-language studies of Arab-language performance is small, that which explores contemporary theater is even smaller, and that which looks at contemporary Egyptian political performance is almost nonexistent, whether in an international context or otherwise. Thus, in addition to the central aim of questioning modes of response to the “war on terror,” I hope that this study will also broaden our sense of where performance occurs and what performances are worth study.
That said, it would be impossible to discuss all of the works that fall under the topic of this study, necessitating some painful excisions. In some cases, truncation eliminated plays, such as Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell*, that would provide merely an additional example to support arguments already made in relation other texts. Others, such as Carrol Churchill’s *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You*, struck me as not particularly compelling or adequately situated in the initial reviews and academic responses. Finally, there were very interesting works, such as Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* and Sulayman al-Bassam’s *al-Hamlet Summit*, that simply fell outside of the divisions for this study.\(^3\) Additionally, it should be noted that the greater presence of British and American work is not meant to replicate the Eurocentric practices of Western theater studies. Quite simply, there is more theater produced in America and Britain than in Egypt. And, more to the point, the thematic scope of the chapters excluded some Egyptian work. For example, there is no Egyptian play, to my knowledge, exclusively about Afghanistan, perhaps because the struggles in Palestine, Iraq, and within Egypt itself have commanded more attention. Additionally, by definition, Egyptian writers would not be included in a chapter on Arab American and British Muslim playwrights, though the Egyptian American Youssef El Guindi is present.

Aside from the primary sources of live performances, films, and play scripts explored here, I also attempt to place these responses within a broader historical, political, economic, and social context, arguing that the “war on terror” represents the latest manifestation in the history of nation states, that of a neoliberal order that seeks to define its enemies as terrorists in order to pervasively expand its reach. In exploring these ideas of power, nationhood, and neoliberalism, I have turned extensively to the work David Harvey and Neil Smith, for their historical and

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\(^3\) In the case of the latter, Margaret Litvin’s work on al-Bassam, cited in the Bibliography, as well as her forthcoming book on *Hamlet* in the Arab world, does a wonderful job of exploring this neglected work.
contemporary mapping of neoliberalism, Giorgio Agamben, for his critiques of extralegal power in the twentieth century, and Naomi Klein, for her tracing of the intersections between economic exploitation and military and police oppression. Additionally, the work of Hayden White and Raymond Williams are, as always, indispensable to me when considering how history is represented in art, as are the writings of Dwight Conquergood when thinking about the ethics of performing lived experiences. Still, one of the tragedies of researching the Middle East in the American academy is that many of our most reliable theories and theorists still do not adequately engage the realities of contemporary Middle Eastern lives. Thus, I am grateful for the recent move toward more nuanced and rigorous theoretical approaches to the region that have helped with this project, from Leila Ahmed’s and Saba Mahmood’s questionings of the deployments of feminist discourses in the region to Talal Asad’s explorations of the assumptions of human rights and terror discourses to John Calvert’s recent politically and economically situated biography of Sayyid Qutb. Furthermore, I have been aided, like all other scholars of Egyptian performance, by Nehad Selaiha’s continued chronicling of the Egyptian theater in *al-Ahram Weekly*. Just as I aim to bring plays from three performance sites into conversation with one another, I hope to also bridge the theoretical gap between those who write about Western powers and those who write about Middle Eastern lives. Through this, I hope to provide a means to acquire greater critical understanding of the interconnected lives and power dynamics that shape the modern world. Too often, studies of Middle Eastern literature/performance and studies of Western imperialism run like the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey, close together and parallel, but far from where they will be joined. It is my hope that by taking these concerns to performances about the war on terror, they will find their way together, much as the rivers do, in southern Iraq, though this tale will also require traversing the Nile and Thames, among other famed tributaries.
Moreover, this study has been shaped not only by studying texts, recordings, and live performances, as well as their theoretical and historical contexts, but also by three years spent tracking and recording this information across twenty countries on four continents. Though there is not room to tell this story here, the arguments presented have taken form not only in traditional academic spaces, but in those corners of the world that do not fit neatly on a bibliography: street-side conversations in Hizballah and Hamas strongholds in Lebanon and the West Bank, respectively; time in refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan; interactions with clergy along the Shankshill and Falls roads in Belfast; discussions with torture victims in Iraq, Algerians in France, and Muslim and Christian Arab immigrants in London and New York. Similarly, my framework for resistance to the “war on terror” has been formed at anti-war demonstrations in Chicago, watching strikes against austerity measures in Greece, and attending rallies in support of the victims in Gaza in Egypt. My study’s narrative has stretched from the high-rises of Dubai to the slums of Cairo to debates with government employees in Washington, D.C., and it owes much to the artists, academics, families, and fellow-travelers who broke bread and sipped countless cups of tea in helping me understand an alternative shape of the world than the one I inherited.

In the end, it is my hope to bring three sets of material—performances, theoretical/historical studies, and field research—together into a timely analysis of how theater artists in Cairo, London, and New York have responded to the political, military, and economic policies that have defined the previous decade. I hope that, by joining these works in conversation together, we can see both our shared successes and failures in addressing the modern forms of oppression that stretch across these cultures. In this way, I share concerns with both scholars of transnationalism and anti-globalization activists, while hoping to move these
concerns in a new direction by bringing them to a comparative analysis of political theater that also includes Middle Eastern performance. This, I believe, requires reexamining many received beliefs about where theater is made, how American policy affects lives, and how we think about those lives. Based on this reexamination, I contend that the only successful form of resistance to these powers, both inside and outside the theater, will be a more intimate and diverse transnational resistance.

With this in mind, the opening chapter seeks to trace the historical evolution of both globalization and notions of terrorism throughout the twentieth-century, in order to create a framework for the analysis of the plays that follow. Toward this end, I argue that, as the nation-state became the only acceptable form of political arrangement in the twentieth century, those that resisted this form of government, worked against specific regimes, or struggled against political oppression to form their own nations were labeled as terrorists, providing an excuse to regulate and/or eliminate opposition to prevailing political and economic power. Building from arguments made by Neil Smith, David Harvey, and Giorgio Agamben, I argue that this was particularly important because the rise of the nation-state also paralleled the rise of globalization and, eventually, neoliberalism, carrying with them mass economic exploitations that needed military and police state powers to regulate dissent and preserve or exacerbate class stratification.

I then examine the Middle East as a site of resistance to neoliberalism that parallels the more widely chronicled resistances and forced regime changes of Latin America. Specifically, I look at the economic concerns of both militant and non-militant Islamic organizations and theorists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Additionally, I examine the protests outside the Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 and the attacks of September 11th as ruptures that destabilized the spread of neoliberalism at a point
when it seemed to have conquered the planet. Thus, as we move into the second decade of a new
century, there are widespread challenges to the prevailing political and economic order, from
alternative loan systems in Latin America to mass protests throughout the Middle East to pro-
union demonstrations in American state houses. Though it is too soon to know how all these
events will play out, they do provide a stark background by which to analyze political theater
from around the world.

From there, the next three chapters examine theatric works within each of the nations
under consideration separated into their individual national contexts. Chapter Two explores
Tarek Al-Dwery’s adaptation of *The Double Life of Dr. Valmy* and Youssef Khamis’ adaptation
of the Taguba Report in order to represent torture on Egyptian stages. Specifically, I examine
how the adaptation of foreign texts can be used as a form of resistance in a highly censored
theatric environment, such as that in Cairo, where every performance must play before the
Ministry of Culture’s censors before opening to the public. In this environment, it was normally
impossible for a work about torture to be performed, given the Mubarak regimes regular use of
torture against both its critics and those the U.S. dropped off for interrogation. Consequently,
paralleling events in Egypt with those from other times and places became a means by which
artists critiqued the Mubarak regime within Cairo’s independent theater spaces.

Additionally, I explore the repeated images used in depictions of torture in both Egyptian
drama and film, and how those same acts, particularly discussions of sodomy, are often repeated
within reports of torture from both Egypt and Iraq, including in accounts that predate 9/11,
despite many claims that American policy changed after the attacks. Given Darius Rejali’s
argument in *Torture and Democracy* that regimes with an interest in hiding their torture practices
share many common “clean” torture techniques, it is not surprising that such iconography would

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be shared, and the interplay between methods stands as a strong critique of the relationship between the security services of Egypt and the United States. As if to underscore the nature of the Egyptian police state, the theater that presented al-Dwery’s production was closed for two years for “safety” renovations after a string of political performances that tested the limits of expression under the Mubarak regime.

Interestingly, though the dilemma in Egyptian theater during the Mubarak years, and likely still today, was always one of what one is not allowed to say, the crisis in contemporary Britain has often been one of what one is allowed to say. This represents itself in two ways: the first came through the misrepresentation of facts that helped pave the way for the invasion of Iraq, and, secondly, in the world of theater, an increase in productions of “verbatim” theater, or plays based on actual speech, collected through interviews or public domain. Thus, the third chapter explores Hayden White’s and Dwight Conquergood’s theories of historiography and ethnographic performance, respectively, in order to examine how British theater, in works such as David Hare’s Stuff Happens and Richard Norton-Taylor’s Justifying War, engaged the journalistic and political crisis created by the September Dossier, which presented false claims about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction capabilities that were used to sell the war in Iraq. This allows for a discussion of the rise of verbatim and documentary theater forms in Britain, as well as a consideration of the diminishing trust in political and journalistic presentations of information.

What is perhaps most interesting about these plays is that they created an alternative metanarrative, one in which all journalistic and governmental information is to be mistrusted, that even crossed over to fictional dramatic works, such as Steven Lally’s Oh Well Never Mind and Colin Teevan’s How Many Miles to Basra? While this cynicism creates a less dangerous
framework than the gullibility exploited in the lead-up to the Iraq War, it also risks lapsing into an equally solipsistic monolith, one that avoids asking the more challenging questions not just of whether false information was presented, but to whose advantage. Thus, while verbatim theater can provide a means of public education on the issues of the day, it also runs the risk of replicating many of the same framing techniques that cause traditional journalism to oversimplify stories and pander them to a narrow audience.

As British theater moved into a public, verbatim theater exploring social and political issues, American theater has developed in the opposite direction, shrinking most commonly into a narrow realm of psychological realism, often seen in domestic dramas. In fact, in many ways, American theater, particularly on Broadway, can be seen as an alternative form of censorship to that used in Egypt: one dependent on economic constraints, rather than governmental oversight. Not surprisingly, then, most initial theatrical responses to the attacks of September 11th on American stages took the form of domestic drama. Thus, the fourth chapter builds on Stephanie Coontz’s sociological analysis of American family myths and examines the prevalence of family drama in American theater, considering this tradition’s impact on theatrical responses to 9/11 and Iraq and arguing that the narcissism of works such as Neil LaBute’s *The Mercy Seat* and Christopher Shinn’s *Dying City* tend to turn audiences into themselves and away from historical contexts and political events.

The alternative to this structure is presented in Thereesa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros’ *Omnium Gatherum*, which moves the domestic drama away from the realistic family setting and into the other-worldly realm of a dinner party in hell, where victims and perpetrators of a terrorist attack gather together, both to eat their meal and talk politics and religion, as the sounds of explosions grow ever nearer. In this manner, the play explores what it might actually
mean to gather enemies together at the same table in order to discuss their differences, and,
eschewing the hollow platitudes of many family dramas, it does not reach any happy
conclusions, ending with an explosion and white light, rather than a hug. As such, *Omnium
Gatherum* avoids the temptation of using 9/11 as another plot device by which to hang a
relationship squabble or interpersonal conflict of little consequence and, instead, examines
political discourse and social relations in a post-9/11 context. This was an anomaly, and New
York stages quickly reverted back to much safer family dramas.

With the theoretical, historical, and individual performance contexts outlined in the
opening four chapters, the following five chapters change focus to formal and thematic concerns
explored in cross-cultural analyses that compare how similar narratives and structures have been
used in different cultural contexts to resist both the “war on terror” and local forms of political
oppression. The first of these chapters looks at musical responses to the “war on terror.” This is
in part because musical performance represents a highly commodified and visible form of theater
in the West and also because the most famous, and infamous, Egyptian play about the Iraq War,
Khaled al-Sawy’s *El Lab fel Demagh* (*Mind Games*) is staged as a cabaret. Thus, I begin with a
short discussion of the recent, highly commodified production of *Hair* on Broadway, looking at
the commercialization of anti-war iconography and asking if the musical, in particular, and
popular performance, in general, can present a politically viable form of resistance.

With these questions on the table, and with help from David Román and Tim Miller’s
own explorations of “preaching to the choir,” I turn to *El Lab fel Demagh*, a work that both
angered Egyptian censors, but also too often provided simple slogans where true political
alternatives were needed.4 It was, in the end, a critique of the oppressors that did not provide a

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4 It’s worth noting that al-Sawy, now a famous film star, was an early and visible supporter of the recent protests in
Cairo.
glimpse of an alternative system beyond oppression. The same can also be said of Jonathan Rosenbaum’s cabaret *Bush Is Bad: A Musical Cure for the Blue-State Blues*, which sought to console those aching after John Kerry’s election loss. In some ways, it is unfair to compare the two works, given that Rosenbaum had no intention of offering any political alternatives. However, the responses to the works are fascinating, with Rosenbaum’s sharp lyrics being deemed comical and entertaining, while al-Sawy’s critique of American imperialism was regularly labeled as anti-American. In this way, the works, aside from raising questions of how to use the stage as an alternative political space, also provide a glimpse into the regulation of political dissent from those subjugated to American imperialism, as well as the continued deployment of Orientalist criticism.

The same system of regulation can also be seen in how Afghanistan has been depicted on stage and screen. Chapter Six, therefore, examines how representations of Afghanistan always remove the period of Afghan history between British and Soviet presences, ignoring an era of relative peace and growth in favor of a narrative of endless war. As a starting point, I briefly exam Marc Forster’s film adaptation of *The Kite Runner*, within a context of Orientalist film iconography and tropes within the representation of Afghanistan, particularly regarding the depiction of women and Communists, where the former are always victims and the latter always oppressors, though not necessarily of one another. To aid in this analysis, I examine Jack G. Shaheen and Lina Khatib’s writings on depictions of the Middle East on film, an arena more developed than writing about how Middle Easterners are depicted on stage.

With this frame in place, I turn my attention to the representation of Afghanistan in Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and the Tricycle Theatre’s trilogy *The Great Game*, both of which overtly aim for a more progressive and historicized depiction of Afghanistan. That having been
said, they both contain the same historical erasures as *The Kite Runner*, preferring to represent periods of Western engagement with Afghanistan and Taliban oppression to any images of Afghans joining together in positive self-governance. As such, the works, despite their attempts to provide an alternative, nuanced view of the country, continue to perpetuate a narrative of Afghanistan as a lawless land of perpetual war in which the only hope of any sort of peace or stability is through Western intervention and military occupation. Despite intending to interrogate American foreign policy, both plays continue the Orientalist fantasy necessary to promote militarism and the construction of an American puppet regime in order to promote American political and economic interests in the regime, most noticeably, alongside Iran’s border.

Of course, American soldiers can also now be found against the opposite Iranian border, in Iraq, where Western stage representations often remove any context that would pose the possibility of a democratic, egalitarian Iraqi rule. With this in mind, Chapter Seven begins by examining the rhetorical construction of a “rogue state” with regards to Iraq and considering Anthony Kubiak’s concern over whether theater replicates or challenges the symbolic system that allows for the continuation of political violence. I then turn toward the play *Aftermath* and the representation of Iraqis in *Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom,’* asking if the depiction of Iraqi experiences on Western stages not only critiques the invasion of Iraq, but also becomes a mask by which the specific historical and economic contexts and violences that allowed for the invasion are removed. On one hand, these works humanize Iraqi characters and move beyond images of “terrorists” who “hate freedom.” At the same time, they also too often create a sequence of endless horrors, sacrificing individual humanity for a narrative of
unescapable suffering, once again creating an Orientalist image of lawlessness that needs Western intervention.

In opposition to this, I examine the productions of the Iraqi plays *Baghdadi Bath* and *Sub Zero* at the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Both works, I argue, create a context in which the violences of the American state are equivalent to those committed by Saddam Hussein’s regime. Despite this, both also try to move to a possibility of their characters escaping the violence and recreating positive human experiences on the other side of their suffering. This is particularly true of *Sub Zero*, which ends with one lead character saying, “We have to be happy,” and the other simply replying, “Smile please” (15). Though this ending could be accused of sentimentality or unrealistic hope, it does provide an image of Iraqis moving beyond the horrors of their past independent of Western salvation, which is to say that it’s an image rarely given to Iraqis, Afghans, or Egyptians on international stages.

Chapter Eight takes a turn away from cross-cultural depictions and discussions of Orientalist iconography and instead looks at the violence and disruptions that soldiers carry home from war, how those violences are sometimes replicated at home, and how these issues find their way to stages in London, New York, and Cairo, while also placing these works within a context of research on post-traumatic stress disorder and studies of post-combat violence, particularly the Fort Carson murders in the United States. Interestingly, Gregory Burke’s play *Black Watch*, about the fabled Scottish Regiment’s experiences in Iraq, their readjustments back home, and the disbanding of their regiment, has been one of the most successful plays about the Iraq War in both London and New York. In large part, this had to do with the production quality juxtaposed against the brutal honesty of the soldiers in a script based on interviews with Black Watch soldiers. What most in the celebratory audiences would not have recognized is that, with
the severing of the regiment and return to solitary home lives, what the play depicted was a narrative incohesion that can exacerbate PTSD conditions and perpetuate alcoholism and violence. The same inability to readjust is also present in Bekah Brunstetter’s *Oohrah!*, a work that challenges simple notions of military heroism in order to depict a soldier’s difficult adjustment to the mundane routine of his home life and, inevitably, his choice to return to the instability of war, rather than struggle with trying to bridge the gap between his experiences in Iraq and his wife’s attempt at creating a Martha Stewart fantasy at home.

From these stories of fractured returns, I turn to Mahmoud El-Lozy’s trilogy *We That Are Young*, a cycle that begins by challenging the heroic myths of Egyptian victory in the 1973 war with Israel by depicting a soldier’s fractured psyche and inability to sustain the official lie upon his return from the war. The trilogy then continues into an exploration of the next generation of Egyptians, growing up under the Mubarak regime, and still bearing the scars of the previous generation’s legacy in both war and oppression. As the weight from years of suffering under political and economic oppression continue, one of the characters simply states, “I’m afraid I’m coming very close to demanding revenge rather than justice,” a line particularly telling in light of the recent revolution in Egypt (77). Through this, El-Lozy demonstrates that the trauma of war can be carried down through generations, showing how soldiers and civilians alike become the discarded victims of maintaining political and economic power.

The erasure of identity has also become a much easier means of social engagement for many in America and Britain than understanding the complex and diverse terrain of Muslim and Arab experiences. Though the two are far from being synchronized states of being, Chapter Nine begins by taking note of the conflation between the two identities, as well as other “brown-skinned” ethnic identities, as in the case of Sikhs and Hindis involuntarily dragged into anti-
Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes. With this in mind, I turn to the construction of hybrid identity within diasporic communities in the United States and Britain, beginning at first with the Egyptian American Youssef El Guindi’s exploration of the post-9/11 security state in America in *Back of the Throat*. From there, I move to the multiethnic Muslim community depicted in Alia Bana’s romantic comedy *Shades*, as well as the more traditional multinational dispersion of Iraqis displayed within Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire*, a play that explores the experiences of Iraqi women in Iraq, Britain, and the United States.

Finally, I look at the work of British Bengali playwright Tanika Gupta, who combines many of these concerns in her plays, which explore communities that are both multiethnic and multinational within Britain, while attempting to place them within a contemporary economic and political context. In this way, Gupta’s plays mirror many of the films of leftist British directors, such as Ken Loach, Michael Winterbottom, and Stephen Frears, whose works depict how hybrid diasporic communities work together in the face of economic oppression, while, at the same time, constituting a single community of exploited labor for those with economic power. This chapter ends with a discussion of Gupta’s play *White Boy*, which explores the construction of ethnic identity within a multinational, multiethnic, and multi-religious working-class community in London. Through this, Gupta is able to show that, despite talk about the value of diversity, diverse forms of oppression within a transnational economic system make it impossible for cross-cultural interactions alone to bring an end to violence. Instead, there is a need for an alternative system of engagement and opportunity.

In an attempt to explore one possibility for what this alternative might look like, the final chapter examines Naomi Wallace’s theater-making practices, which have included trips to Palestine and Egypt to personally learn about conditions there. Given this framework, I look
closely at her play *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East*, one of the few American
dramas to draw connections between Palestine and Iraq, as well as one of the few plays about the
“war on terror” to have been staged in Cairo, London, and New York. Through an examination
of these performances, as well as Wallace’s writing on the interconnectedness and intimate
relationship between American, British, and Middle Eastern lives, I argue for the necessity of a
more intimate form of transnational resistance to neoliberal globalization and militarism, one that
can understand the effects of global political events on the smallest spaces of distant lives, as
well as one that resists the underlying systems of oppression, rather than their symptoms.

Through a mix of personal narratives from my field research and analysis of theoretical
texts about internationalism, performance, and scholarship, the conclusion then expands on the
idea of transnational resistance, arguing for the need for more direct contact from scholars and
artists with(in) the spaces affected by global political and economic structures, particularly in
those areas where the misinformation brought back often outweighs knowledge of actual lives
lived. In the end, those who have been given the privilege to move across borders have an
obligation to walk beside of and listen to those struggling against international systems of
political and economic oppression. There is an obligation to speak the less heard stories, to put
human faces beside the textbook numbers, not in a manner that replicates colonial salvational
beliefs, but in a dialectical form that also interrogates the traveler, and that questions who is
allowed to move across borders and whose stories are allowed to be spoken. In the end, there is
a need for a more creative understanding of how knowledge is formed, on stage and in
scholarship, and a more complex and varied approach to these processes, thereby allowing the
next wave of transnational resistance to be one not merely of solidarity, but of empathy and
understanding.
Chapter One

Who’s the Terrorist?

In his study of the historical representation of terror in performance, entitled *Stages of Terror* (1991), Anthony Kubiak writes in depth of the parallel between terror and theater, arguing that “[t]errorism is now called ‘theatre’ while we try to convince ourselves that what happens on stage can have anything to do with the real terrorisms of ruptured bodies and wounded minds” (4). As a metaphor for understanding both the mediated nature of contemporary terrorism, as well as questioning the deployment of theatric representations of such acts, understanding the interplay between the language of violent performance and performative violence is useful. After all, if the call of theatric interrogations of performance is to critique political violence, it must not recreate the spectacle of violence at the heart of its critique. As a means of understanding terrorism in and of itself, however, Kubiak’s framework is inherently problematic. This is demonstrated, for instance, when he states, “[T]heatre is the site in which cultural consciousness and identity come into being through fear; it is the proleptic locus of terror’s transformation from thought into culture and its terrorisms staging the very birth of that which seemingly gives it birth—namely Tragedy” (5). The problem here is that Aristotle evaluated tragic drama on its ability to produce “pity” and “horror.” The modern language of “terror,” in general, and “terrorism,” in particular, was not available to him. That Greek tragedy was violent is undoubtedly true, but it was an unspectacular violence, in which deaths occurred off stage. We, however, live in a world of “terrorism” rather than pity, where neither Osama bin Laden nor George W. Bush show remorse for their hubris. Staging this, in the end, requires a departure from Aristotelian notions. It requires not only an understanding of terrorism as media
event, but also a consideration of the parallel trajectories of terrorism, the nation-state, and neoliberal globalization, a framework that I will examine here before moving on to specific examinations of theater about the “war on terror” in the following chapters. But first, perhaps, we must begin by knowing the history of the words we use.

Defining “Terrorism”

The practice of describing violence as “terror” is rooted neither in Aristotelian notions, nor in contemporary media landscapes, but during the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, particularly during 1793-1794 (“Terrorism: An Introduction”). While current definitions of “terrorism” are dependent on the distinction of non-state actors, the original linking of “terror” to political violence posited the acts within state-sanctioned violence, whereby “presumed enemies of the state” met their fate as a means of stabilizing the revolutionary government (“Reign”). In fact, the online edition of the Columbia Encyclopedia notes that “the Revolutionary government's Terror was essentially a war dictatorship, instituted to rule the country in a national emergency” (“Reign”).

Not coincidentally, the earliest references to “terrorism” in the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary date to the mid-1790s, under the definition, “Government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789-94; the system of the ‘Terror’ (1793-4)” (“Terrorism”). The second definition of “terrorism” listed in the OED, “A policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the employment of methods of intimidation; the fact of terrorizing or condition of being terrorized,” while more familiar to a contemporary audience, also finds its roots in the 1790s in, oddly enough, Thomas Mathias’ satiric The Pursuits of Literature (“Terrorism”). Most
interesting in the *OED*’s listing of various definitions of “terrorism” is that, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, references to terrorism remained connected to some form of entrenched power, whether social or political, enforcing its will upon the general population. Terrorism, as a form of political regulation, was born with the nation-state, not in resistance to it.

Terrorism, therefore, has always existed alongside rhetoric of democratic freedom, as the threat that marshals the public will behind the state’s desire. For example, in his 1863 *Manual of Political Economy*, Henry Fawcett wrote, “If anyone should disobey the decision of the meeting, he would subject himself…to a social terrorism” (“Terrorism”). The roots of terrorism seem to have appeared in a social or political organization’s desire to assert its will over a populace. Despite that, it should not come as a surprise that, in a pre-globalized, pre-transnational world, it would be state actors that had the ability to enact the largest acts of terror, since it was the state that would control political and military power, and it would be through acts of mass terror, in both public and private, that the state would maintain its power. At the same time, as the nation became the dominant form of political arrangement, state violence would need to become normalized and justified, while extreme forms of violence would need to be displaced onto non-state actors. Thus, as political and economic power began to be rooted in state actors—and their new legal, political, and economic conventions—at the start of the twentieth century, a new framework for understanding the relationship between the terrorist and the state also began to take hold.

For Italian legal theorist Giorgio Agamben, this reformation is best expressed as a struggle between “the right of resistance” and the normalization of “the state of exception.” Building on Carl Schmitt’s notion of dictatorial constructs within democracies, Agamben notes
that, in the formation of the 1949 German constitution there were debates leading to the inclusion of “a right of resistance, if no other remedies are possible” only against “anyone who attempts to abolish” the constitutional order (qtd. Agamben 11). Through this, the Germans paradoxically created a definition of resistance that allows for the use of extrajudicial means. Despite this, the right to resistance actually became a legal justification for the opposite extralegal state: the suspension of laws in defense of the prevailing political order, or the state of exception. While Agamben notes that exceptions to the rule of law had always walked alongside the practice of “democracy,” such as in the American Civil War, he argues that the state of exception became a more common structure during the period of World Wars in the twentieth century (12). Though Agamben does not say as much, his argument essentially implies that the state of emergency is incumbent upon the democratic nation-state.

Interestingly, as Neil Smith notes in The Endgame of Globalization (2005), the period of World Wars was also the period of developing the modern global economic system, as well as structuring its beneficiaries. For Smith, globalization and neoliberalism are merely contemporary expressions of manifest destiny. The conflation of liberal and conservative rhetoric and ideology can be seen throughout American history, including in the privileging of property rights in the American Constitution, as well as the international institutions that two liberal icons—Woodrow Wilson and Harry S Truman—fought for just after World War I and II, respectively.¹ Rather than using American economic power to force territorial change, Smith sees Wilson as interested in using power to control the international economic system, making the global exchange of capital subject to American will, regardless of any on-the-ground circumstances. It was a strategy of geo-economic, rather than geo-political chess (77). Smith

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri similarly note, “In the dominant line of European political thought from Locke to Hegel, the absolute rights of people to appropriate things becomes the basis and substantive end of the legally defined free individual” (Commonwealth 10).
also finds a second moment of American global economic ambition being exerted at the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, through the creation of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as the 1947 invention of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which would become the World Trade Organization in the mid-nineties (83-4). In the end, the failure of liberal ideology, as with Wilson, lies less in not achieving “peace on earth,” but in the belief that “a capitalist world built on global competition could ever yield an end to war and guarantee permanent peace” (61).

In light of this failure of liberalism, it is important to note that, in the middle of the twentieth century, both the reordering of state power that Agamben writes about and the reordering of international economic systems that concerns Smith ran on parallel courses. Ultimately, the increased economic ambitions and economic divides that would become part of globalization, and, later, neoliberalism, required increasingly powerful police and military presences and controls to maintain them, leaving the economic ambitions of the democratic nation-state with anti-democratic police powers. They also led to a redefinition of “terrorism.”

Though Carl Schmitt has theorized the concept of the political actor outside of acceptable government in the long-run of history,² it is in the mid-twentieth century that the use of the word “terrorism” itself began to shift from describing those in power to describing those trying to rise up against entrenched power. For example, in the novel Borstal Boy (1958), Brendan Behan writes, “[T]he Irish were forced always into terrorism to get their demands” (“Terrorism”). By describing Irish-British relations, the Behan quote seems to point toward the reason for the change in terminology: an increase in and organization of anti-colonialist violence throughout the world. In shifting the rhetoric of terrorism from the state to the liberation forces, Western governments attempted to portray anti-colonialists as the instigators of unjust violence, rather

² Most explicitly, this occurs in Schmitt’s Theory of the Partisan.
than acknowledging the violence the West used to maintain foreign domination. In fact, just as “terrorism” was coming to describe non-state actors, the Geneva Conventions and human rights discourses were becoming structuralized. Acts of extraordinary violence by states would henceforward be known as human rights violations or war crimes. Meanwhile, violent acts by non-state actors, whether arbitrary or in resistance to state violence, would be labeled as terrorism.

Furthermore, given the development of these discourses during the age of colonialism, not all states were created equal. That Western economic and political structures directly violated the ability of non-Westerners to live humanely was the lie to these structures that was meant not to be spoken. To this end, Joseph Slaughter notes that legal forms in general, and human rights laws in particular, do not “reflect the social world,” but, instead, “help shape how the social order and its subjects are imagined, articulated, and effected” (11). In the end, the rights discourses not only determined a legal order, but also defined what a “human” was and how humans could interact with one another. And it is as part of this change that Behan’s more contemporary concept of “terrorism” became the standard use, and the “defense of freedom” became its antithesis.

Writing on the ideological appeal of neoliberal discourse, David Harvey notes, “Concepts of dignity and individual freedom are powerful and appealing in their own right. Such ideals empowered the dissident movements in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the end of the Cold War as well as the students in Tiananmen Square” (5). Such an analysis is true not only of the “free” in free markets, but also of the early appeal of the United Nations as a body that would create a more peaceful (i.e., “free”) world, as well the construction of human rights discourses, particularly the Geneva Conventions, which expressly claimed to seek the protection
of individual rights. A universal equality, however, was never the goal of the United Nations, as Smith notes in relation to the oft-remarked imbalance of the Security Council, which solidified American, British, French, Chinese, and Russian interests as wielding more power than those of other nations (111). Similarly, Agamben concludes that human rights discourses are less a means of liberating individuals from oppressive state functions than a means by which to legislate the structure of individual lives, and, by extension, to determine the relative value of those lives (Homo Sacer 75). Combined with the previous note on the disproportionate power accorded to the United Nations Security Council, rights discourses also became a means by which to regulate states without the ability to veto condemnations of their actions.

Looking back at the multiple instances in which the United Nations and its apparatuses have been used to sustain imperialism rather than promote human rights, what is surprising is not the fact that such events occur, but that anyone would expect anything else. After all, one of the earliest decisions of the United Nations—the resettlement of Jews in Palestine—created one of the most consistent human rights failures of the U.N. The nakba (catastrophe), and its contingent history of war, occupation, and mass refugee crises provides both the limits of human rights discourses and one of many instances of the construction of “terrorist” rhetorics. Little did the Palestinians know that the guerrilla tactics that proved their only recourse under occupation—which had once borne the French and American states—would now be seen as terrorism, an unacceptable form of violence in response to the myriad state violences unleashed upon a people.

Ironically, France was pioneering this discourse strategy in Algeria, where resistance to occupation was not seen as a noble attempt to create a nation-state and join the international order, but as terrorism. With this in mind, Hardt and Negri write, “The concept of nation also served as an ideological weapon to ward off the dominant discourse that figured the dominated
population and culture as inferior; the claim to nationhood affirmed the dignity of the people and legitimated the demand for independence and equality” (*Empire* 106). What those struggling for national liberation could not know was that a discourse was forming by which to shape their liberatory struggles as outside the acceptable norms of international engagement. As Franz Fanon notes in his writing on the Algerian independence movement, the rhetoric of terrorism became a language of the Other: “If it does not wish to be morally condemned by the ‘Western nations,’ an underdeveloped nation is obliged to practice fair play, even while its adversary ventures, with a clear conscience, into the unlimited exploration of new means of terror” (Fanon 24). Fanon, of course, is using “terror,” in the previous sense of defining acts of mass state violence, like those perpetrated against the Algerian people by the French state. However, the French state had already begun recoding the terminology, such that any attack on civilians by anti-colonialist forces was labeled as terrorist, even if it was responding in kind to colonialist acts. Thus, an anonymous *OED* entry from 1963 mentions “the challenge to the authority of State presented by O.A.S. terrorism” (“Terrorism”). Clearly, by the late twentieth-century, the rhetoric of terrorism had been politicized into a means of characterizing one’s opponent in armed political struggles, with opposing sides competing to label the other as “terrorist,” as outside the bounds of legal order, and as pariah in the international community. As the Council on Foreign Relations notes, “Today, most terrorists dislike the label” (“Terrorism: An Introduction”). This shift not only helped to demonize anti-colonial struggles, but also helped pave the way—and the rhetoric—for the implementation of the neoliberal era.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property
rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (2). On its surface, all the talk about freedom that accompanies neoliberalism sounds rather nice. However, the actual practices of neoliberalism—massive tax cuts for the wealthy, privatizing the public sector at below-market rates, removing social safeguards for the most poor and vulnerable, and opening a nation’s economy to external exploitation—lead, conversely, to reduced economic freedom. Sadly, as soon as the anti-colonial movements began to remove the shackles of their oppression, the global powers began to find alternative methods to structure their interests into the new governments. Sometimes, this involved economic incentives provided by the IMF, World Bank, and GATT/WTO. There is also a long line of CIA and military interventions that used communism as a justification for toppling regimes whose economic policies were not friendly to the United States and Britain.

The most famous of these interventions occurred on September 11, 1973, when the CIA helped overthrow the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende and installed General Ernesto Pinochet as the new ruler. Pinochet would violently repress not only Allende’s supporters, but all on the left that challenged the new neoliberal orthodoxy. Meanwhile, trade unions were disassembled and market regulations removed (Harvey 7-8). While the plan worked out profitably for any number of ruling elites and international corporations, this kind of restructuring of wealth never comes peacefully, and Chile became a training ground, not just for neoliberal economics, but also for advanced torture techniques. As Darius Rejali writes, stealth techniques for torture were widespread at the end of the twentieth century, particularly among states in contact with democratic regimes that needed to hide their methodologies, much like Chile’s relationship with the CIA (9). And Rejali finds a litany of torture techniques present in

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3 In his contribution to the film collection *September 11*, British director Ken Loach filmed the story of a Chilean man writing to America to remind its people that, in his country, 9/11 was the anniversary of this coup.
Chile, from the use of blindfolded push-ups to electronic shocks. As this process moved from Chile to Argentina, what becomes clear was that torture had begun to stand alongside states of exception and globalization in the modern narrative of the nation-state.

Back in the West, amid rampant inflation and high unemployment in Britain and the United States, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan would rise to power in the late seventies and early eighties, all too willing to add military might to the pursuit of neoliberal economics. In the United States, this meant that Reagan coupled deregulation, tax cuts, budget cuts, and attacks on unions with bombing Grenada, funding Contras in Nicaragua, and arming the mujahideen in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Thatcher used the nationalism created by attacking the Falkland Islands to promote similar attacks on the “welfare state.” Over time, police actions became a norm, not just of the Reagan/Thatcher era, but moving forward into the Clinton/Blair years, while economic stratification grew at home. At the same time, as the Soviet threat decreased, rhetorics—and formalized definitions—of terrorism proliferated, aided by the rise of the PLO—including Carlos the Jackal’s hostage-taking during the 1975 OPEC meeting—the Iran-hostage crisis, and the continued labeling of leftist militias in Latin America—and their resistance to American neoliberalism—as terrorism. For the new neoliberal states, the terrorist appellate would become the ultimate label of this evil outside politics.

Over the past quarter century in the United States, official definitions of terrorism have tended to follow within this trend of terrorist as other/enemy. In 1984, the U.S. Code defined terrorism as

any activity that (A) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life that is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or
of any State; and (B) appears to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping. (qtd. in Chomsky 16)

Interestingly, this definition expands the legal code of the United States to “any State,” thereby using the language of “terrorism” as a means to regulate state interests across a global terrain. Also, the definition does not move toward placing terrorism as a method of insurgency, but, instead, leaves open the possibility of state-sponsored terrorism. Why the difference? A summary look at international violence aimed at Americans during this period provides a reasonable explanation. In the early eighties, the Soviet Union still presented the United States with its chief rival, but, at the same time, Americans being held as hostages in Iran and the Marines’ barracks being bombed in Beirut required the government to define terrorism in a manner that included state and non-state violence, as well as violence against civilian and military populations. Thus, any organization or government that captured or killed a noticeable number of Americans outside of the confines of a declared war could be defined as terrorist, as immoral. At the same time, the broad definition also led to accusations that the United States sponsored acts of terrorism itself. For example, Alexander George, writing on “The Discipline of Terrorology,” tells of a “car-bombing in Beirut that killed some eighty people and wounded two hundred, making it the single terrorist attack that claimed most [sic] lives in the Middle East in 1985. This attack, targeting a Shi’ite leader, was conducted by a Lebanese group that had been trained and supported by the CIA” (84).

In recent years, official definitions of terrorism have been more limited. The United States Department of State, for one, defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated
violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (“Terrorism: An Introduction). Similarly, former Deputy Chief of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center Paul Pillar presents a four-point definition of terrorism:

1. It is premeditated—planned in advance, rather than an impulsive act of rage.
2. It is political—not criminal, like the violence that groups such as the mafia use to get money, but designed to change the existing political order.
3. It is aimed at civilians—not at military targets or combat-ready troops.
4. It is carried out by subnational groups—not by the army of a country.

(“Terrorism: An Introduction”)

There are two important changes within this definition. First is the designation of terrorists as “subnational groups.” Notably, as the nation state became the dominant form of political order, those who act as non-national entities have been labeled a priori illegal. The other significant change comes through the designation of victims of terrorism as “noncombatant targets” or “civilians.” Taking the current example of Iraq, this would imply that, so long as the insurgents in Iraq target American troops, they are not terrorists. It is only when the target shifts to the civilian population of Iraq that acts of terrorism are committed.

It is worth noting the combination of trajectories traced here—states of exception, neoliberal globalization, and definitions of terrorism—were all strongly in place by the time the Soviet Union fell in the early nineties. When the American state’s chief rival was removed, a new world order was already in place, resistance was easily labeled as being outside the international order, and corporations were destined to seek greater profits as governments in
Britain and the United States continued to roll back regulations, and the IMF and WTO forced any nation in need of a loan to do the same.

That is, at least, one story of the twentieth century. There is another, however. A story of two Egyptian school teachers…

A Cairo Story

Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb were born five days apart from one another in early October 1906, in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, respectively. Both showed an early passion for religious study and both would work as teachers in Cairo. Nevertheless, while Sayyid Qutb originally made his name in literary circles, publishing reviews of writers such as the then-unknown Naguib Mahfouz, Hassan al-Banna would first come to prominence as the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928.

In its early days, the Brotherhood was not a particularly notable Islamic organization, scattered among many others promoting individual piety and charity. However, in its opposition to the British-backed monarchy of King Farouk that ruled Egypt at the time, the Brotherhood would find numerous sympathizers, and it grew quickly in size and prominence. As it grew, the Brotherhood developed a system not only of religious instruction, but also of schools, clinics, and other charities. Though rooted in religion and always linked to a call for restoring Islam to a central role in social and political order, a drive for progressive economic aid coupled with a critique of regimes that the Brotherhood deemed corrupt would remain the two central forces within the Brotherhood’s activities for decades to come. Al-Banna’s time with the organization, on the other hand, was cut short. After Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud an-Nukrashi Pasha
was assassinated by a member of the Brotherhood, al-Banna was killed in retribution on February 12, 1949.

In the same year, Sayyid Qutb published *Social Justice in Islam*. As John Calvert notes, *Social Justice in Islam* and *The Battle of Islam and Capitalism* (1951) would provide conceptual and concrete grounds for an argument that the answers to Egypt’s social and economic problems were to be found within Islam, and not in socialism or capitalism:

> Although, according to Qutb, Communism promised to clothe bodies and feed stomachs it was bankrupt when it came to the disbursement of moral values. True freedom, he wrote, was available only through Islam, which combined uniquely the egalitarian emphasis of Communism and the spiritual depth of Christianity.

> Moreover, unlike Communism, Islam is authentic to the Egyptian soul. (160-1)

Like Egypt’s soon-to-be-president Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Qutb rejected American economic models as exploitive and enslaving of the Egyptian people. However, unlike Nasser, Qutb turned to Islam, rather than secular socialism to provide an alternative structure of economic prosperity for the Egyptian people. And had Qutb’s ideology stopped there, he probably would have been known only as providing the theological underpinnings for the Brotherhood’s economic campaign. However, as the monarchy fell and as Qutb grew closer to the Brotherhood, a new struggle would also take shape.

After the 1953 Free Officers’ Revolt overthrew the monarchy in Egypt, the Brotherhood began to more expressly advocate for an Islamic state in Egypt, an idea that did not sit well with the more secular approach to Arab socialism/nationalism that Nasser promoted, and a period of
violence, imprisonment, and torture between the Brotherhood and Nasser’s regime ensued.⁴ Among those imprisoned and tortured during this period was Sayyid Qutb, whose work would grow steadily darker and more radical.

As Calvert notes, Qutb made a significant intervention in the understanding of the concept of jahiliyya (literally, “ignorance,” but also a specific reference to the unenlightened age that pre-dated the Prophet Muhammad’s reception of the Quran). Given Qutb’s dislike of America during his time spent there and his experience of British colonialism, it is not surprising that he would join with many other Islamic scholars of the age in finding Western influences a form of jahiliyya. Qutb separated from his peers, however, when he also applied the term to Muslim societies who, as he saw it, had turned away from the teachings of God after their contact with Western imperialism (Calvert 217-9). Given this, Qutb called for a jihad (“struggle”) against the jahili forces, believing that “Muslims will benefit from the act of fighting in God’s way regardless of the outcome” (226).

In the end, the specific political and economic conditions that Qutb lived under inspired a theology of greater economic and political equality linked to Islamic ideas of resistance. At a time when many others in the world took up arms against their capitalist oppressors, Qutb believed that it was the jahili creating not only economic and political oppression, but a loss of faith. For this, he was executed by the Nasser regime on August 29, 1966.

Just over thirteen months later in Bolivia, Ernesto “Che” Guevara would meet a similar fate.⁵ The rise of neoliberalism and assault on socialism that would follow in Latin America has been detailed at length in many studies. That a similar pattern would run a parallel course in the

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⁴ It should be noted that, since the seventies, the Brotherhood has consistently disavowed violence and terrorism, though some debate exists over whether it had an armed wing at previous moments in history, and splinter groups have certainly engaged in violence.

⁵ While few in Latin America likely noted Qutb’s death, Sheikh Imam, an Egyptian singer who would be arrested for singing about poverty and politics under Sadat, recorded the song “Ghifara maat” (“Guevara Is Dead”).
Middle East is less commonly commented upon, and often divorced from the history of militant Islamic movements. However, economic conditions would prove to run parallel to the shame of defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, as control of Egypt turned from Nasser to Anwar Sadat.

The early days of the Sadat era were a better time for the Muslim Brotherhood, as Sadat attempted to make peace with the group in order to counterbalance the Nasserite communists. This plan ran array, particularly after the signing of the Camp David Accords, an affront against many in Egypt in general, and the Brotherhood, in particular. Equally difficult for many in Egypt was Sadat’s Infitah (“opening”) program, which began a series of privatizations, free-market policies, and ties to the capitalist West, policies which were met by bread riots and mass popular protests. In fact, opposition to Sadat’s policies grew so widespread by the early eighties that Sadat even arrested the Coptic Pope.

Though Sadat was assassinated because of his treaty with Israel, his commitment to neoliberal economic policies lived on in the recently ended regime of Hosni Mubarak, who combined a permanent state of exception with the rhetoric of anti-terrorism in order to cover up the mass poverty and party profiteering that were endemic during his reign. Similar policies would, eventually, spread to Jordan, Lebanon, and most Gulf States, among others in the region. At the same time, the Brotherhood’s influence would also grow throughout the region, combining a critique of secularism with less widely reported social programs to assist the poor, as well as promotion of democratic and economic reforms that many Western liberals would admire.6 Meanwhile, Qutb’s ideology would be divorced from the Brotherhood’s renunciation of violence in the seventies and exported throughout the world, in particular to the mujahideen in Afghanistan, where it would wait for an opportunity to take an entirely different form.

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6 Though this study focuses primarily on Egypt, similar social and democratic policies are also part of the continued popularity of Hamas and Hizbollah and represent political models that trouble the static notion of anti-Israeli terrorists popular in America.
By the mid-nineties, just as the neoliberal order was rising to dominance throughout Europe, Africa, Latin America, and much of the former Soviet bloc, a bloody battle was being fought against Islamic insurgents in much of the Middle East and in Egypt in particular. In the West, much of this has typically been portrayed as violence against a secular state, or as some combination of anti-Israeli and anti-American struggle. What is seldom discussed is the popular resistance to the programs of economic liberalization promoted by many of the secular Middle Eastern governments, in states like Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan. While treaties with Israel and subservience to American interests certainly did not help these governments, neither did the enriching of a small coterie of political and economic insiders in the face of mass poverty. Additionally, as I hope this history points out, contemporary Islamic movements, both militant and nonviolent, have always been tied to the political and economic realities of their times.

Regardless, by the late-nineties, as Bill Clinton was deregulating the banking industry and “reforming” welfare, as Tony Blair continued Margaret Thatcher’s disassembling of social democracy, and as Hosni Mubarak enriched a small coterie through IMF-pleasing structural adjustments, it seemed as if the neoliberal order had swept the world. And then the streets of Seattle erupted outside of the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999.

The Resistance Returns Home

The protests outside the WTO Ministerial Conference were not the first anti-globalization protests, but they were the ones that irrevocably changed the conversation around the world and reinvigorated resistance. The Seattle protests not only blockaded the WTO meetings, but also brought the struggle against neoliberal globalization home to the nation that had most ardently promoted neoliberal orthodoxy. Additionally, the demonstrations allowed American audiences
to see the violence that maintained the orthodoxy, as peaceful protesters were beaten, tear-gassed, and indiscriminately arrested (Thompson). Furthermore, the large-scale of the protests, as well as the organization across traditional conflict lines—most famously with labor and environmental activists—and the use of the Internet for organizing created a model that would be taken forward into a new century of activism. Finally, the Seattle protests told the world that the neoliberal order not only had not won, but would meet strong resistance in the years ahead.

The second rupture to this order came on a sunny Tuesday morning: September 11, 2001, when two planes struck the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, one hit the Pentagon, and another was forced to crash into a field in rural Pennsylvania. Setting aside the solipsistic rhetoric of America’s freedoms being attacked, it is worth noting that those planes which hit their targets only hit expressly military and economic sites. In this way, the attacks of September 11, 2001 both mirror the anti-militarism/anti-globalization protests of Seattle—even as they used markedly different methodologies—and fall within a long line of militant (and non-militant) protests against economic and political oppression by Islamic groups. This is not to say that the killing of thousands of civilians is justified, but that the attacks of September 11th exist within a context and occurred as much for political and economic reasons, as for religious and ideological ones. As Calvert writes in the conclusion of his indispensable biography of Sayyid Qutb, after having noted that both Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri studied Qutb’s writings:

Qutb, whom he [Mohammad ‘Atta] assuredly read, would not have sanctioned the methods of extreme violence that ‘Atta and his terrorist colleagues employed; as Qutb had pointed out in his writings, the killing of innocents finds no justification in the Qur’an. Nor would Qutb have understood Al Qaeda’s desire to attack a Western power in such a fashion. In his mind, the *jihad* against the *taghut*
[“tyrant”] at home was always paramount. However, he would have had little trouble understanding the underlying logic of their purpose. For in the September 11 attacks the hijackers underscored the same point that he made in his prison writings: that the World, as it stands, constitutes a conceptual realm of irreligion and vice that ought to be resisted in the name of God. (292)

Like Qutb’s writings, and like the events of Seattle, the attacks of 9/11 also stand within a decades-long tradition of political and economic choices played out on a world stage.

Inevitably, 9/11 stands as the penultimate event in laying out a contemporary history of the concept of terrorism. From the morning of September 11, 2001, “terrorism” has carried a connotation related to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. As part of this change, the popular conception of terrorism shifted from an act—“politically, motivated violence”—to a perpetual condition. Anymore, one does not commit an act of terrorism, as Timothy McVeigh did; instead, one is a terrorist. Similarly, the most interesting contemporary use of the rhetoric of terrorism presents itself in the conflation of the “war on terror” and the “Axis of Evil.” After all, according to the State Department’s own definition, the official government of a country cannot engage in an act of terrorism regardless of the brutality of its actions.

It would seem that the “war on terror” designation is a linguistic absurdity, given that a war can only be fought against entities, not methods. However, if one comes to understand “terror” not as a kind of act, but as those who oppose the specific construction of a given nation-state, then one can see the “war on terror” as a means to eradicate all subnational resistance. Thus, it is not surprising that many heads of state have found Bush’s rhetoric valuable, whether it

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7 For example, Director of Central Intelligence Porter Goss declared before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "[D]efeatsing terrorism must remain one of our intelligence community's core objectives" (qtd. “The War”).

8 As Bill Maher once said, FDR did not declare war on surprise attacks after Pearl Harbor.
be to regulate the Irish or Muslims in Britain, the Muslim Brotherhood’s critique of the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt, or those who would challenge American military and corporate interests in the United States. The construct has also been useful for Spain in dealing with the ETA, for Russia in dealing with Chechnya, for Israel with Palestinians and Arab Israelis, and for China in its oppression of the Uighur population. What is particularly interesting about this is that many of these states oppose each other on multiple issues, but feel that they should be unified toward anyone who questions the construction of their government.

Additionally, what the above list of organization—the IRA, the ETA, Uighurs, Chechens, and Palestinians—all have in common is that they are or were engaged in nationalist struggles and resistance. However, the focus on al-Qaeda as the preeminent exemplar of all things terrorist has created an understanding in which the anomaly—a terrorist organization with transnational aims—becomes the stand-in for all organizations, despite the more localized concerns of most subnational groups. In this way, al-Qaeda has become the cover for the expansion of preexisting regimes from around the world, who can merely label organizations as “terrorist” and allow the connection to the one international terrorist group to dangle implicitly before their people. It is a means of regulating the world into structured forms of government and opposing all those who resist it.

That having been said, the Bush Administration’s response to September 11th ended up taking both the United States and al-Qaeda into a death spiral. For the American state, the folly of using terrorism as a justification for the invasion of Iraq led to a nearly decade-long misadventure in which the United States weakened itself militarily, economically, and diplomatically, while providing ample opportunity for American political, military, and economic hegemony to be consistently challenged. The markers for this are extensive,
beginning with the failure to institute the Free Trade Zone of the Americas, a NAFTA-like program meant to open the markets of South America to North American exploitation. Additionally, Latin America, after years of coups, torture, and exploitation, has seen a rise of Leftist governments in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, and Brazil. Though these countries are not without their economic and political problems—particularly democratic constraints in Venezuela—they have worked to pose a steadfast alternative to neoliberal hegemony.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda’s endless attempts to strike at the United States often left more dead Muslim bodies scattered across the Middle East than American ones, undermining the strength that many Islamist movements had developed in the previous years. Given this, it is no surprise that the recent wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa have carried the economic and political argument that organizations such as the Brotherhood often promoted in a secular, democratic manner that neither the Bush Administration nor al-Qaeda ever anticipated. Right now, it remains too early to know what the end result of the protests in the Middle East, in general, and Egypt, in particular, will be. This having been said, the collapse of the Mubarak regime represents another failure for the attempts to establish a “successful” neoliberal state. That the poor rose up against this structure in Egypt is a sign of hope, yet it is also a moment of trepidation. As Walter Armbrust notes in a column for Jadaliyya, the Eastern European revolutions after 1989 were too easily brought into a system of economic exploitation, and the top of the Egyptian military has much to gain from maintaining the status quo.

Regardless, it is no surprise that, as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, and as the critique of the global neoliberal structure grows stronger, it is the Middle East and Latin America, just as it was at the birth of neoliberalism nearly a half century before,
leading the newly inspired resistance to these forms of economic and political oppression. The latter of these is beyond the scope of this study. However, appraising the forms of resistance incumbent in the former is essential to understanding how the contemporary Middle East, with all of its complexities and contradictions, is represented.

The Things They Say

Sadly, complexity is not the typical means by which the era has been discussed, perhaps because the framework for understanding the Middle East was already set well before 9/11. In the era after the fall of the Soviet Union, political discourse too often fell into a superficial binary that represented a violent struggle between Western democracies and Islamic oppression. This is a form of discourse that became famous in Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, which posited that “The most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural” (21). Though the faults with this argument have been long documented, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s consideration of its political usefulness is worth noting:

Huntington’s brilliance as Geheimrat in the 1970s was to anticipate the needs of the sovereign, providing beforehand an antidemocratic how-to manual for the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions. Similarly his thesis of a “clash of civilizations” preceded September 11 and the subsequent war against terrorism, which was immediately conceived by the media and the major political powers, sometimes with prudent disclaimers but often not, as a conflict of the West against Islam.

(*Multitude* 738)

For Hardt and Negri, what Huntington did was not objectively analyze the structure of modern politics, but, instead, provide a thesis by which to justify the violent restructuring and maintaining of the neoliberal order, one whose guns were most often aimed at the Middle East.
Similarly, no one has been better at maintaining this binary for large audiences than Orientalist Bernard Lewis. It’s hard to say much more about Lewis than Edward Said’s simple statement that “Bernard Lewis hasn’t set foot in the Middle East, in the Arab world, for at least 40 years. He knows something about Turkey, I’m told, but he knows nothing about the Arab world” (qtd. in Elbendary). Despite this, Lewis’ *What Went Wrong?* became a bestseller just after September 11th by arguing that Islamic civilization moved from dominating Christianity to being subordinated by it since the Middle Ages. That such an argument depends on whether one is comparing Egypt to Britain or Dubai to Uganda would require a degree of distinction that Lewis’ constant references to apparently unified and homogenous “Muslim perceptions” will not allow for. Though there is no particular need for a lengthy exegesis of all the problems with Huntington’s and Lewis’ theses, what remains fascinating is that, despite the wide criticism of such arguments, the binary that they have constructed has been so commonly absorbed as to even structure liberal rhetoric by writers who, ostensibly, disagree with their theses.

For example, when Tariq Ali set out to write his critique of American imperialism, he felt it necessary to title the work *Clash of Fundamentalisms*. True, this was an intentional and critical choice, shifting the terms of debate by referring to America as an “Empire” and American imperialism as “the mother of all fundamentalisms” (xiii). Similarly, Reza Aslan’s *No got but God*, a beautifully written and informative history of Islam, allows itself to fall into a similar structure, where Islamic identity becomes the sole signifier in Muslim lives as the

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9 That a supposed Middle Eastern scholar would be incapable of acknowledging the non-Muslim populations in the region, or sharp distinctions in various schools of Islamic thought is, perhaps, all that needs to be said about Lewis’ “scholarship.”

10 The most succinct criticism of the pair can be found in Edward Said’s article “The Clash.” Additionally, it seems worthwhile to avoid the problem that Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk note with regards to academic pushback against these ideas: “It is illustrative of the fragile base from which most post-colonial, diasporic and multinational theorizing takes place that so many have had to ’deconstruct’ Huntington or at least included his work in debate.” (128).
religion struggles through a Reformation period.\textsuperscript{11} While both Ali and Aslan are making important interventions to a discourse that defines Middle Easterners and Muslims as always-already terrorists, their constructs reflect a discourse that shows Islam and the West locked into a perpetual struggle or that does not allow for the diversity of Muslim (or Western) experiences. Instead of such binaries, it is useful to turn to Talal Asad’s simple, elegant reminder, “In brief, there is no such thing as a clash of civilizations because there are no self-contained societies to which civilizational values can correspond” (12).\textsuperscript{12}

Sadly, many liberal academic responses to “the war on terror” choose to replicate the Islamic/West binary, rather than notions of diversity, such as Asad’s. One example of this occurs in Judith Butler’s \textit{Precarious Life}, which sets out to question how Americans marked violence after September 11\textsuperscript{th}. To accomplish this, Butler moves from exploring the structure of American First-World sensibility after September 11\textsuperscript{th}\textsuperscript{13} to a question of how lives are counted, writing, “Is a Muslim life as valuable as legibly First World lives? ... Is our capacity to mourn in global dimensions foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive of Muslim and Arab lives as lives?” (12). At the same time that Butler struggles to move beyond the Islam/West binary, she also fails to show any lived Muslim experiences, writing about Muslims as an abstract group, with variations, but without any human shape. Instead, Muslims and Arabs remain a distinct and faceless ethnic Other, to be pitied for the violence projected upon them from Butler’s own

\textsuperscript{11} In his conclusion, Aslan writes, “What has occurred since that fateful day [September 11\textsuperscript{th}] amounts to nothing short of another Muslim civil war—a fitnah—which, like the contest to define Islam after the Prophet’s death, is tearing the Muslim community into opposing factions” (266).

\textsuperscript{12} The popular Islamic singer Sami Yusuf has similarly stated, “I don’t believe there’s a clash of civilizations. I believe there’s a clash of the uncivilized. We need a wave of people to come along and bridge the gaps, because we have so much in common, so much to learn from each other. We need to silence the extremists. Let’s hope the moderates will take the microphone and be louder” (Wise).

\textsuperscript{13} The most pointed moment of this concern occurs when Butler writes, “Most Americans have probably experienced something like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its aftermath. What kind of loss is that? It is the loss of prerogative, only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one’s own boundaries transgressed” (39).
culture, but never to be described as closely as the people immediately around Butler, or with any specific sense of place or experience.

The same binaries also occur in Nicholas Mirzoeff’s *Watching Babylon*. Mirzoeff’s goal, to examine the war in Iraq through “visual subjects: people defined as the agents of sight (regardless of their biological capacity to see) and as the objects of certain discourses of visuality” is one that has immense merit in the era of cable news and multinational media corporations (3). His formations of these visual subjects, however, always work to replicate the terrorist-nation-state/America-other binaries. Thus, Mirzoeff writes, “The television-watching group is by no means homogeneous. Someone watching al-Jazeera is going to have had a very different experience of the war in Iraq than the habitué of Rupert Mudoch’s Fox News” (18). Similarly, he notes, “My project is to refuse the designation of neatly divided worlds where peoples and nations are offered stark choices to bet with ‘us’ or against ‘us,’ whether that we is the United States, al-Qa’ida, or the Taliban” (25). Fair enough. Would that we all could think outside of these binaries. But the only choices that Mirzoeff offers are America and al-Qaeda/the Taliban, Fox News or al-Jazeera. Where is the space between? Even in ostensibly opposing such a viewpoint, the structure of Mirzoeff’s argument reaffirms that which he chooses to resist. Additionally, Mirzoeff’s visual-based analysis is rooted in the assumption that changes in communicative technology restructure the means by which people approach war. But is this true?

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein initially indicates that she may see September 11th as a turning point like so many other commentators when she writes, “I thought I was witnessing a fundamental change in the way the drive to ‘liberate’ markets was advancing around the world,” but she quickly turns away from this analysis (10). Instead, she states clearly, “I
discovered that the idea of exploiting crisis and disaster has been the modus operandi of Milton Friedman’s movement from the very beginning—the fundamentalist form of capitalism has always needed disasters to advance” (11). To support this statement, she traces the combined use of political and economic shock in order to collapse economies for the profit of the rich and powerful through widespread examples, such as Chile under Pinochet, Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, Iraq after the U.S. invasion, Thailand after the tsunami, and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. For Klein, the only change found after September 11th is a greater domestication of Milton Friedman’s ideology, writing, “What happened on September 11, 2001, is that an ideology hatched in American universities and fortified in Washington institutions finally had its chance to come home” (14). The change, instead, comes from the privatization of the war and disaster industry, allowing profits to be turned throughout the catastrophe, rather than in the aftermath alone (16). Building off terminology from the American occupation of Baghdad and the follow-up to Hurricane Katrina, Klein writes of an increasing division between red and green zones around the world, where “[i]t’s easy to imagine a future in which growing numbers of cities have their frail and long-neglected infrastructures knocked out by disasters and then are left to rot, their core services never repaired or rehabilitated. The well-off, meanwhile, will withdraw into gated communities, their needs met by privatized providers” (525). As if to underscore this idea, Timothy Noah, in an important 2010 analysis of economic inequality in America for Slate, notes, “[I]ncome distribution in the United States is more unequal than in Guyana, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and roughly on par with Uruguay, Argentina, and Ecuador. Income inequality is actually declining in Latin America even as it continues to increase in the United States.” Noah also clearly shows that this economic divide began in the seventies, not in
recent years. As Klein declares, “Bush’s exploits merely represent the monstrously violent and creative culmination of a fifty-year campaign for total corporate liberation” (22).

It is also in juxtaposition to Klein’s conclusions that the strengths and weaknesses of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s conceptions of the modern era—an argument stretching across three books: *Empire, Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*—perhaps can best be explored. On one hand, the claim that globalization had brought an era of deterritorialized capitalism to the United States was rendered patently untrue by the invasion of Iraq (*Empire* 18). On the theoretical level, Neil Smith also notes, “Power is never deterritorialized; it is always specific to particular places. Reterritorialization counters deterritorialization at every turn” (51). Certainly, Iraqis, Afghans, and Palestinians experience American power in very territorialized terms, whether by death, occupation, or expulsion. Likewise, on the morning of 9/11, it would seem clear that Osama bin Laden did not experience American power in this way, as he looked toward the continued presence of American troops in his homeland of Saudi Arabia, the nation of Medina and Mecca. And it is because of America’s territorial reach that the British Iraqi rapper Lowkey likes to point out that the United States is the only country in the world with over one thousand military installations.\(^{14}\) It seems clear that, while America’s economic control may move indiscriminately across geographic boundaries, this movement is enabled by America’s geographically-bound power.

Where Hardt and Negri are stronger is not in the diagnosis of power, but in their creative formation of resistance. For them, the lesson from Seattle was that of a “network” form of resistance, wherein people of divergent backgrounds “acted together without any central, unifying structure that subordinates or sets aside their differences. In conceptual terms, the

\(^{14}\) For example, see Lowkey’s song “Terrorist?” which plays off a notion used in the song “Min Irhabi?” (“Who’s the Terrorist?”) by Palestinian rappers D.A.M., both available with visual reinforcement on YouTube. Both also serve as inspiration for the question in the title of this chapter.
multitude replaces the contradictory couple identity-difference with the complementary couple commonality-singularity” (Multitude 3803). For them, the means of overcoming neoliberal globalization is in a diffuse form of resistance, wherein individuals maintain their autonomy and distinct traits, while working as a collective to overcome the forms of oppression enacted in various ways on all of them. Political change rests on a utopian gathering of divergent claims to rise up against a singular form of oppression, or, as they say in Commonwealth to cut “diagonally across these false alternatives—neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist—and open a new space for politics” (ix). Through the search for a diverse alternative, they seem to capture the zeitgeist of the anti-globalization and post-9/11 anti-war protests, such as the famous chant from Seattle: “Teamsters and turtles together.” Certainly, activists seek encouragement from one another, as the protesters against anti-union actions in Madison, Wisconsin demonstrated when they compared their governor to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. At the same time, for those protesters to think that losing collective bargaining is the same as earning less than two dollars a day or that they risk mass violence simply for voicing their concerns is a grave mistake, even if these concerns are emblematic of the same system. It would be a mistake for a theorist to also lose these distinctions when promoting alternative forms of sociality.

Thus, I find a return to Klein’s work instructive. Unlike most of the analysts and theorists previously discussed, she describes the contemporary era in ways that avoid the obvious fallacies of demonizing Islam, creating a simplistic binary between Islam and the West or America, and assuming that the world changed on September 11th. Instead, she examines the roots of the economic and political exploitations that have created many of the militant organizations around the world, and shows a continuum of these policies—advanced as they may have been by the Bush era—into the contemporary moment. That the Hariri family in Lebanon,
the monarchy in Jordan, and the previous dictatorship in Egypt—the last being the subject of much of this book—have willingly cooperated with such plans both before and after September 11th all display the failings of many of the more dualistic and temporalized analyses produced in recent years. I would only add that the neoliberal/torture regime that Klein describes has also been aided by the rise of terrorism discourse, as historicized above. If “neoliberalism” is the goal, and shocks enabled by states of emergency are the methodology, then “terrorism” has become the ultimate justification. That all four of these forms developed simultaneously with the rise of the nation state and now work together to maintain the dominant political and economic order should come as no surprise. Historically, most political systems have worked to establish power and then exploit their populations until the point of decline.

Despite this tweak to her argument, Klein also does the important work of going into the spaces where these exploitations have been perpetrated in order to see the affective and effected faces in person. Similarly, Edward Soja has written in his most recent book *Seeking Spatial Justice*, “Seeing justice spatially aims above all at enhancing our general understanding of justice as a vital attribute and aspiration in all societies. It seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilize and maintain cohesive coalitions and regional confederations of grassroots and justice-oriented social movements” (6). If transnational resistance to these regimes of neoliberalism, legal exceptionalism, torture, and the terrorist-nation state binary is to have any success, then it must achieve a more geographically diverse, personalized form of engagement, one that understands the effects of policy in an array of diverse corners of the world not commonly ventured to and also knows the lives of the peoples in these places. The human scope
of resistance must become more humane, more complex, and more diverse if there is to be any hope.

As I write this, the battle of neoliberal policies has returned to the United States, where protesters in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana are battling Republican administrations attempting to remove the right of collective bargaining from public employees in a continued and cynical gutting of the public sector. Interestingly, these protesters are regularly turning to the attempts to overthrow corrupt and exploitative regimes in the Middle East for inspiration. As with the protests in the Middle East, it is too early to know what these struggles in the United States will bring, though a questioning of economic doctrine in America might help the whole world. What we do know is that the challenge in Cairo and the challenge in Columbus remain the same: not to merely make superficial changes in politicians, but to radically rethink the social, political, and economic systems that we have come to inherit and to propose a viable alternative, an alternative rooted in the intimate understanding of the human consequences of the systems we institute across a wide range of human experiences.

In the pages that follow, I explore, as one means of entrance to this dilemma, how theater artists across three cities have sought to question these systems, sometimes falteringly, sometimes failingly, sometimes with trenchant insights and heartbreaking clarity, but, at their best, always with the hope that a better way of being together lies ahead.
Chapter Two

Censoring the Torture Debate: Political Violence and Egyptian Theater

Egypt was not supposed to have a revolution. At least not in the winter of 2011. This was the consensus. The Egyptian people were too beaten down, too oppressed, too caught up in their daily struggles to survive in the face of economic exploitation to rise up. The Mubarak regime had too large a state security apparatus. Its years of torture had instituted too much fear. There was too much funding from the United States and too much support from Israel. There was too little organization among the opposition, other than the Muslim Brotherhood. And too many people were scared of the Brotherhood’s religious rhetoric to overthrow the regime. Even Al-Jazeera English, an institution known to challenge Arab regimes, saw its headlines steadily change from “Can Egyptians Revolt?” (26 January) to “Egyptian Youth and New Dawn Hopes” (29 January) to “A People’s Uprising Against Empire” (6 February). No one was ready for a self-immolation in Tunisia to lead to the eventual downfall of the Egyptian regime. Yet it did, at least in terms of removing the figureheads of that regime.

And now, as happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall, scholars will look back and try to piece together the events and sites of resistance that helped create the collapse of 12 February 2011. Were the protests after the 2005 and 2010 elections an indicator? The Kefaya (Enough) movement’s work to organize disparate voices of dissent? The imprisonment and release of Ayman Nour, who had been jailed, essentially, for finishing second to President Hosni Mubarak in the previous presidential elections? The bread riots and labor strikes of recent years that challenged an advancing liberalization program? The initial—though later overturned—acquittal of Parliamentarian Mamdouh Ismail for a ferry disaster that killed nearly one thousand people?
Certainly, all of these events will be discussed and charted in books and articles that ask, with various agendas and concerns, why exactly did the Egyptian people rise up that winter? Most likely, though, none of them will discuss the Egyptian theater as a site of meaningful political resistance.

Despite this, the theater was a space where artists and audiences were able to gather, below the radar of mass cultural events, and question and challenge the policies that ruled their lives. And in the last decade before the revolution, many of these questions explored the relationship between the Egyptian and American states during a period of imperialism and its contingent violences. These questions, though, were always subject to a strict censorship regime that forbid any direct critiques of the Egyptian state. Works about torture were a rare dramatic breed on Egyptian stages in the waning days of the Mubarak regime, leading many artists to turn toward adaptation as a method of interrogating the interrogators, both of the Egyptian and American variety, thereby turning Egyptian stages into important sites of resistance to both the regime of violence and the regime of censorship that prevailed. While the numbers that saw such performances would pale in comparison to the numbers in Midan Tahrir during the revolution, such performances helped keep the breath of resistance alive until more rose up. In fact, in Tarek al-Dwery’s adaptation of Antonio Buero Vallejo’s *The Double History of Doctor Valmy* and Youssri Khamis’ dramatization of the Taguba Report on abuses at Abu Gharib as the play *Fadayehat Abu Gharib*, what we see is an attempt at resistance that predated the revolution and ran under the mass cultural radar and an attempt at documenting and challenging the torture regime that helped maintain the Mubarak regime and the American state. Thus, it is worth exploring these plays within the political and cultural contexts of torture and its debates and

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1 In fact, performance helped document the protests, as Egyptian critic Nehad Selaiha wrote in her first column after the attacks (“Tahrir”).
representations both in Egypt and America, specifically in the writings of Seymour Hersh about Abu Gharib and Darius Rejali’s *Torture and Democracy*, the Egyptian film *The Yacoubian Building*, and popular media debates over whether or not torture occurs, works, and has changed since 9/11. In the end, the plays stand as strong arguments against a pervasive, ineffecctual, and long-standing shared torture regime between the Egyptian and the American states, while, in terms of resistance sites, the Egyptian theaters appear to have both struggled against and been constrained by the prevailing powers of their time.

**Staging Dissent**

Unfortunately, this is not how Egyptian theater—or its use of foreign texts—is often discussed. In fact, at the end of his critical examination of contemporary Egyptian drama in the article “Cairo as Global/Regional Cultural Capital?,” Said Sadek proclaims that Egyptian society “engrosses itself with reproducing world classics like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* but avoids any script that tackles current domestic issues like political succession, religious revival, and the status of women” (184). This claim raises a number of salient issues. To begin with, it would seem that Sadek is rather unfamiliar with Shakespeare, if he thinks that *King Lear* had no resonance in a country with an eighty-two-year-old President who had served for nearly thirty years.\(^2\) Additionally, it points to a crisis in playwriting within Egyptian theatre, where it is commonly said that the quality of original drama has steadily decreased since the sixties, and where many new productions are director-driven and/or devised works.\(^3\) More relevant to this analysis, it presents one bookend to the extremities in how critics and theorists often discuss non-

\(^2\) In fact, there was a successful production of *Lear* that ran in Cairo and Alexandria in the winter and spring of 2009.

\(^3\) That having been said, one of the most famous Egyptian adaptations, Ali Salim’s *The Comedy of Oedipus*, came during the golden age and used the Oedipus story to critique Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, due to running afoul of Israeli-Arab politics, Salim’s works are no longer performed in Egypt.
Western adaptations of Western work—the critique that foreign texts are stifling either indigenous artistic production or that they fail to address local concerns. On the opposite end, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s classic study *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors contend, contrarily, drawing on a quote from Salman Rushdie, that “the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise” (196), resisting “a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes” (171). These two arguments trap artists in an interesting predicament. On one hand, their use of foreign texts represents a failure to engage with local issues and encourages the dissolution of a native artistic community. On the other hand, they are equally obligated to engage foreign texts to rewrite the cultural prejudices and power structures presented in them. In short, foreign texts can either be used to stifle one’s own culture or respond to an outside culture, but not to accomplish local cultural work.

But what of works that fall between these extremes? In attempting to engage issues of torture, both domestic and abroad, Egyptian theater artists find themselves in an interesting space that challenges notions of how to engage appropriated texts from other countries. After all, there is little hope of a domestically written play about torture ever reaching an Egyptian stage, given the requirement that all performances that sell tickets play before the censors before opening, and given the rather limited political and cultural clout of most theater artists. As yet, the only theatrical works to even approach the topic of torture have been comedies and cabaret pieces, most famously Khaled al-Sawy’s *El Lab fel Demagh*, though this work deals more with issues of neoimperialism and the relationship between the American and Egyptian states, rather than with issues of torture directly.4 Additionally, even works critical of American uses of torture create

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4 *El Lab fel Demagh* will be discussed in depth in Chapter Five, which explores musical theater.
tension for a regime with close ties to the American state.⁵ At the same time, there is little to write back against. When large percentages of the population viewed George W. Bush’s claims of bringing democracy to the region or Hosni Mubarak’s promises to care for the Egyptian people with incredulity, inverting them makes little political progress—and, in fact, it can be argued that their actual statements create the most political liability.⁶ Similarly, there is little pro-torture dramatic literature to reconstitute, perhaps aside from writing back against episodes of 24. Instead, many Egyptian theater artists work in a context that requires an attempt to reappropriate foreign texts not to speak back to the countries that produced them or in lieu of domestic dramatic production, but in order to address local and regional issues in a highly regulated environment. Unfortunately, this process also risks trapping the artists within an international discourse on torture that often misses the local contexts in which torture exists.

Living under the Franco regime, Antonio Buero Vallejo had an intimate understanding of the social and political contexts in which torture existed. Like many of Buero Vallejo’s plays, The Double History of Doctor Valmy (1968) explores the violent oppression and repression of dissent during the Franco years. In fact, Valmy not only examines the effect of torture on the victims, but also its degenerating effect on those who perform the acts of torture, and the state and society that order them. The story of the play revolves around Daniel Barnes, a member of the secret police, who grows impotent after having tortured a political prisoner. Because of this, he seeks help from a psychiatrist, Dr. Valmy, whose memory of the events creates the play’s frame. As Daniel explores the consequences of his own actions, his marriage begins to unravel, particularly after his wife learns about the actions of her husband from a former acquaintance

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⁵ One of the twenty provisions of the Egyptian Censorship Law actually lists “The defamation of a foreign state or people bound by friendly relations to the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Egyptian people unless deemed necessary for a historical analysis required by the context” (Bora’e).

⁶ Certainly this was the case when Egyptian protesters booed and held up their shoes to the screen when Mubarak’s speeches were broadcast in Midan Tahrir.
whose husband was the subject of Daniel’s interrogations. As Daniel realizes the effects of his actions, he attempts to remove himself from the state apparatus, only to be told that such an act would subject him to torture. In fact, his employer, Paulus, directly tells him that he will, “Shut you up,” a clear threat in a climate where the police use tactics from electric shock to rape. In the end, Daniel ends up dead, his wife mad, and the torture apparatus continues as it had before, even removing Dr. Valmy for telling Daniel’s story in the narrative’s frame.

Because of its straightforward focus on torture, *Valmy*, unlike many of Buero Vallejo’s plays that were performed during the Franco regime, was unable to make it past Spain’s own censors and was not performed until 1976. Only three years later, Nabil Moneib staged the play in Cairo in response to the crackdown on dissent during the latter years of Sadat’s time as President, a crackdown that had direct effects on the theatre industry. Nearly thirty years later, Tarek al-Dwery returned the play to the Egyptian stage, retitled *Dimaa ala Malabis al-Sahrah* (*Blood on an Evening Dress*) at a different point of crisis.

As noted in the previous chapter, Giorgio Agamben has argued that the state of exception in Western democracies becomes a normalizing mode of the expansion of state political power. For Agamben, the state of exception was a legal means of control that both existed outside the normal legal structure and attempted to justify itself within that structure until it became a normal mode of national operation (1). In Egypt, this legal form represents itself as the

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7 As Sadat moved toward an economic liberalization program—infitah—he faced growing resistance from the Nasserites in Egypt, which led to a crackdown against the Egyptian left, including many artists. Additionally, to counterbalance the left, Sadat eased restrictions on Islamist movements, many of whom also had little regard for theater artists.

8 Though these are probably the two most discussed iterations of *Valmy* on Egyptian stages, there have been others between them, including a television adaptation of the work. Additionally, Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous also adapted the work to deal with the Israeli occupation. Titled *The Rape* and banned in Syria, this version played at the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theater in the nineties.

9 Specifically, Agamben writes, “[I]f exceptional measures are the result of periods of political crisis and, as such, must be understood on political and not juridico-constitutional grounds…then they find themselves in the
permanent emergency state that has existed since the assassination of Anwar Sadat and coincided with the Mubarak era. This regime of power included a massive security state apparatus and policing of dissent, including the regular arrest, detainment, and torture of critics of the government, protesters, and opposition party members. As Agamben would appreciate, the temporary law meant to maintain order after Sadat’s assassination became a permanent means of maintaining the Mubarak regime and its itinerant system of cronies and profiteering.

In the spring of 2006, when an adapted version of *Valmy* was set to perform at the Hanagar Theatre in Cairo, this state was in a mode of crisis. Just over six months before, Mubarak had been “reelected” to office, along with accusations of widespread vote rigging, bribery, and suppression of dissent. On the day of his inauguration, a large protest was held, and, shortly thereafter, the candidate who finished second in the election, Ayman Nour, was imprisoned—his release only coming in May 2009. This was coupled with the continued arrest and torture of political dissenters, echoed again in the bread protests during the spring of 2008, the protests against the Egyptian complicity in the Israeli bombing of Gaza in winter 2008-09, and the assault on protesters during the revolt in winter 2011. Additionally, Egypt has long been discussed as one of the nations that the United States extradited “enemy combatants” to. The state of emergency was, essentially, being used in order to maintain a constant state of crisis thereby constantly justifying the state of emergency. And torture was—and remains—an inextricable part of this system.

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10 As of this writing, the intervening military government has not lifted the “emergency law,” though it promises to dos so before the national election. Thus, Egypt’s state of exception, as of yet, spans two legal regimes.

11 This relationship is discussed in depth in Darius Rejali’s *Torture and Democracy* and Jane Mayer’s *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*, as will be discussed below.
This prevalence of Egyptian torture was not lost on al-Dwery. Critic Nehad Selaiha has written about the cinematic elements of al-Dwery’s production, noting that the “slimming” of the script, rearranging of the scenes, and use of cross-cutting pieces of dialogue—all innovations on the original script—were a part of al-Dwery’s conception of “the show as a film performed live.” Thus, rather than having static scenes that moved from one scene to the next, with simple changes of set, al-Dwery divided—and rotated—the stage and scenes, as if moving between different film clips, in order to show the relationship between the different stage spaces—from the torturer’s home to his office to the psychiatrist’s study in a quick succession that would not allow the audience to escape the clear relationship between them. At the same time, in watching video of the production, what also struck me was the darkness of the show, which only has flashes of warm light within the home, and even there, black is perpetually at the edges. If a film, it certainly has shades of David Lynch in the gnawing undercurrent that always threatens to sweep the family’s stability away. In part, this sense is created through the use of the aforementioned divided set, which creates a world in which torture is literally always at the edges of the lies that maintain domestic stability. Like Lynch, al-Dwery seems to understand that this suburban stability exists in the light through the sublimation of the political, economic, and sexual systems of order and oppression that maintain it. Thus, while Lynch often has a dark sexual undercurrent invade the home, al-Dwery brings the darkness of torture into the light of the home, thereby undermining the middle-class order. This is only heightened by the cross-cutting of scenes, which allows al-Dwery to oscillate the action between the interrogations and the home, showing how one is inextricably linked to the other, and how the two will inevitably work to undo one another. As such, the societal complicity is underscored: torture exists not just when
the government perpetrates it, but when systems within the state, the home, and the sciences
work together to create acceptance of the status quo, or at least to minimize resistance to it.

A similar exploration of those who seek out the truth versus those that accept the status
quo can be found in Youssri Khamis’ play *Fadayehat Abu Gharib* (2008), or *Abu Gharib
Scandal*. Published, but as-of-yet unproduced, Khamis’ script is an unusual work in its
documentary nature, which uses the investigation and report into abuses at Abu Gharib by
American Major General Antonio Taguba as its starting point for an exploration of the events at
Abu Gharib. In fact, the form of a docudrama is relatively rare in Egyptian theatre owing to a
number of reasons. It is not a form with a deep theatric history, as it is in the United States and
Britain. Additionally, while much work in Britain—*Justifying War, Stuff Happens, How Many
Miles to Basra?*, and the recent production of *Oh Well Never Mind*—owes itself to a crisis in
reporting about terrorism and war, the same sense of failed journalism does not present itself
when newspapers divide themselves into state and opposition slants. No one suspects *Al-Ahram*,
the most widely distributed newspaper in Egypt, isn’t adequately questioning state figures—they
know it, because the state owns the newspaper, which also underscores the difficulty of getting
officials on record for a docudrama in the first place. And, there is, of course, censorship. One
recent attempt at documentary theatre, the production *Radio Muezzin*—about the plans to remove
muezzins, the prayer callers, from the vast majority of mosques and switch to a unified call
broadcast by radio—was forced into invitation-only performances during the winter of 2008
because of the controversial nature of its topic.

Regardless, the Taguba report in itself does not make for particularly dramatic work.
Unlike the Tricycle Theatre’s Tribunal plays or Anna Deavere Smith’s performances about

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12 Documentary theater in Britain, in general, and the plays listed here, in particular, are the topic of the following
chapter.
moments of cultural conflict, the report does not contain the inherent drama of a courtroom or two groups within the same city pitted violently against one another. Instead, it is a list of observations, breaches of protocol, and recommendations of change, with a fifth of the text simply consisting of citations and cross-references to unreleased interview texts. While “pouring cold water on naked detainees” and “sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick,” are disgusting in terms of human rights and politically engaging, an endless list of such activities does not particularly make for compelling theatre (Taguba 17). Additionally, the vast majority of the Taguba Report actually does not deal with torture, but with the systematic breakdown of command and order at Abu Gharib, where there were also multiple cases of fraternization and prisoner escapes. This leads to the report containing passages such as, “The perimeter lighting around Abu Gharib and the detention facility at Camp Bucca is inadequate and needs to be improved to illuminate dark areas that have routinely become avenues of escape” (25). Presumably, this is equally dry on stage as it is on the page. At the same time, focusing only on the initial reports from Abu Ghraib removes the broader torture context in which it exists and risks replicating the failures of the torture debate.\(^\text{13}\)

Defining Violence

What has gone under-reported, however, is the actual degree of violence involved in the American detainment and torture program, and its impact on state torture practices in other nations. In May 2004—approximately one year before al-Dwery’s production of *Dimaa ala Malabis al-Sahrah*—CBS’ *60 Minutes II* and Seymour Hersh, writing for *The New Yorker*, both

\(^{13}\) In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein writes in depth about a similar neutral stance among human rights organizations, who often divorced the cataloguing of torture in Latin America in the seventies from the political and economic contexts of that torture, including failing to name its beneficiaries (146-7). This is a pattern that continues in recent reports on Iraq (Sifton).
broke the Abu Ghraib story during the same week. Often overlooked in attention to the pictures that these stories produced was a paragraph early in Hersh’s article listing the various abuses recorded in the Taguba Report:

Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape, allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee. ("Torture" 1)

In this initial reporting, Hersh attempted to draw connections between the acts at Abu Ghraib and broad ranging Administration policy, writing, “In letters and e-mails to family members, [Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II, one of the enlisted soldiers charged in the case] repeatedly noted that the military-intelligence teams, which included C.I.A. officers and linguists and interrogation specialists from private defense contractors, were the dominant force inside Abu Ghraib” (2). Unfortunately, at the time, much of this non-pictorial information was overshadowed by a discussion of whether or not the pictures merely represented the kinds of behavior found during fraternity initiations.14 Aside from the pictures having never been released, this was the best possible scenario in which to frame the debate for the Bush

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14 For example, Rush Limbaugh responded by declaring on his radio show, “This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation and we’re going to ruin people’s lives over it and we’re going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time. You know, these people are being fired at every day. I’m talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release? You [ever] heard of need to blow some steam off?” The next day, Limbaugh reduced the claims of torture even more: “And these American prisoners of war—have you people noticed who the torturers are? Women! The babes! The babes are meting out the torture...You know, if you look at—if you, really, if you look at these pictures, I mean, I don’t know if it's just me, but it looks just like anything you’d see Madonna, or Britney Spears do on stage. Maybe I’m—yeah. And get an NEA grant for something like this” (Koppelman).
Administration, since a discussion of what constitutes torture deflects attention from an analysis of how high up the chain of command responsibility should go.

Similarly, in Cairo, many writers refused to name the most violent acts that occurred in Abu Ghraib. Writing in the English-language (and state operated) weekly *al-Ahram Weekly*, Ahmad Naguib Roushdy notes, “In the spring of 2004, the American media reported that Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison were being subjected to torture and inhumane treatment. They were regularly gagged, bound, hooded, beaten (one top Iraqi general died in the process) and made to suffer various kinds of physical and psychological assault and humiliation.” This description demonstrates a lack of specificity as to the kinds of violence being perpetrated, as opposed to the list provided in the initial reports. Likewise, in a parallel to the what-is-torture debate in the United States, a year later, Muqtadr Khan wrote, “The reports in the media that Americans at Guantanamo facility [sic] allegedly desecrated the Quran to torture prisoners…is worse than Abu Ghraib; Abu Ghraib represents the physical and psychological torture of a few Muslims, Quran desecration represents a spiritual, emotional and psychological torture of all Muslims.” While this may be true in terms of optics and relationships between the American state and Muslim communities around the world, the idea of trying to create a hierarchy of tortures and punishments—and debating whether religious desecration or being sodomized by a

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15 Dealing with Egyptian newspapers presents an interesting dilemma, given the odd constellation of state and independent/opposition newspapers, as well as the difference between what one can write in English and in Arabic. Also, there remains an issue of archiving. Thus, while *al-Ahram Weekly* is state operated, it’s allowed more space for criticism than its Arabic counterpart, the daily *al-Ahram* (there is also a French weekly by the same name). More importantly, the al-Ahram constellation of papers are better archived than many of their English and Arabic counterparts, especially as the *Masr al-Youm* (Egypt Today) website continues to undergo a redesign. The good news is that these distinctions become less relevant when dealing with criticisms of the American government than ones of the Egyptian regime. For example, *al-Ahram Weekly* was as likely as any newspaper in the Arab world to raise an eyebrow at Rahm Emmanuel being Barack Obama’s first administration appointment. This isn’t to say that there aren’t differences between papers in the level of criticism raised or how it is framed—afer the last American elections, for example, the opposition newspaper *al-Dastour* ran the headline “Obama First Black President in White House and Fifth American President in Mubarak Era”—but the following quotations can provide a basic sense of what details were foregrounded after Abu Ghraib. Lastly, in an interesting twist for theater scholars, the preeminent critic of Arabic-language theater, Nehad Selaiha, also writes for *al-Ahram Weekly*. 
broomstick is more humiliating—creates a framework that benefits the Bush Administration, because it is a debate of methods, rather than responsibility.16

Meanwhile, in an article three years later, Hersh expanded on the list of crimes committed at Abu Ghraib, with Taguba telling him that the “first wave of materials” sent up the chain of command included “the sexual humiliation of a father with his son, who were both detainees,” images “of an Iraqi woman detainee baring her breasts,” and “a video of a male American soldier in uniform sodomizing a female detainee” (Hersh 1).17 Furthermore, the extreme violence of Abu Ghraib was beginning to be displayed at a number of other American prisons. Hersh notes that “Shortly after September 11th, Rumsfeld, with the support of President Bush, had set up military task forces whose main target was the senior leadership of Al Qaeda. Their essential tactic was seizing and interrogating terrorists and suspected terrorists; they also had authority from the President to kill certain high-value targets on sight” (7).18

Hersh also writes in detail about the contradictions between official military investigations and those conducted by human rights organizations, pointing out one in particular that was conducted by Brigadier General Richard Formica at Camp Nama, a Special Forces detention center at Baghdad International Airport. Hersh explains that Formica “concluded that detainees who reported being sodomized or beaten were seeking sympathy and better treatment” (“General’s” 6). While debates focused on whether waterboarding or nudity were torture, or

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16 In his analysis of what are now known as the torture memos, David Cole argues in his introduction to his collection of those memos, “It is this consistent pattern of result-oriented reasoning, insistently maintained in secret over several years and by multiple lawyers—even as both the statutory law and the administration’s own public statements seemed to become more restrictive—that is ultimately the most compelling evidence of bad-faith lawyering” (20). Cole goes on to note that the memos, produced by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, attempted to protect officials, rather than to explore competing legal arguments, used obscure and questionable definitions for terminology, particularly that of “torture,” and never found a requested practice to meet their definition of torture (21-4).

17 The Telegraph has also reported on accusations that soldiers photographed themselves raping at least one underage male prisoner (Gardham).

18 Human Rights Watch has also noted several homicide cases involving detainees who died during CIA interrogations.
whether soldiers desecrated the Quran and what that meant, prisoners were being sodomized, raped, and killed in prison.

This erasure is a tendency that Jasbir K. Puar makes note of in her book _Terrorist Assemblages_, where she writes,

The focus on gay sex [in some of the simulated acts photographed] also preempts a serious dialogue about rape, both the rape of Iraqi male prisoners but also, more significantly, the rape of female Iraqi prisoners, the occurrence of which appears neither news- nor photograph-worthy. Indeed, there has been a complete underreporting of the rapes of Afghani and Iraqi women both inside and outside of detention centers. (98)

For Puar, the sexualization, and, in particular, homosexualization, of acts of torture represents a desire to always-already see the terrorist body as queer, as a non-normative, non-national other that poses a threat to the national self or collective. This leads her to write that “it is precisely feminizing (and thus not the categories of male and female, as Axel notes), and the consequent insistence on mutually exclusive positions of masculine and feminine, that strips the tortured male body of its national-normative sexuality” (99). Given this, Puar argues that the political deviancy of terrorism becomes inscribed with the sexual deviancy of homosexuality and becomes a space where sexualized power is inscribed on terrorist bodies, both to undermine the reproduction of the terrorist and reinscribe perversion to the terrorist, rather than the torturer. In the end, just as the terrorist is seen as breaking national boundaries, the torturer breaks the detainees’ physical and sexual boundaries. These distinctions, though, were always erased in the debate over waterboarding, which hid the American torture state’s violent and sexual excesses beneath a bucket.
For Khamis’ part, instead of centering the action on the report itself, the action of the play involves Antonio Taguba’s attempt to find out what happened at Abu Gharib, making it a work more in line with David Hare’s envisioning of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in *Stuff Happens* than the verbatim work of *Guantanamo* or *Justifying War*. The play, then, begins with Donald Rumsfeld asking, “What happened at Abu Gharib?” before going on to summarily discuss the situation and then tasking General Taguba with looking into the events (26). This leads to the structure for the bulk of the play, which is a series of interviews between Taguba and prisoners and guards at the prison, as well as General Karpinski, who was responsible for the oversight of Abu Gharib, until she was removed from her duties after the scandal broke. In fact, the play ends with Karpinski talking about the importance of understanding what happened at Abu Gharib and repeatedly referring to “the truth” in her final monologue, as she explains that she was told to have the Iraqis all show respect and submission to their captors (88). The juxtaposition between this idea—not uncommon for interrogators—and its actual reality in the photos from Abu Ghraib creates a dramatic ending for the play. In between, the interviews all follow a similar format, with Taguba asking the people their names, their role at the prison, then going into more detailed questions about what happened. Naturally, one of these interviews involves Lynndie England, who, when asked about the acts she was photographed committing and why, answers, in part, “Just to have fun” (43). Interestingly, though, neither the question, nor most of England’s answers are in English, this one line is in both English and Arabic, highlighting her Americanness at the point when she justifies acts of torture. That having been said, “just” fun is neither “just” in the sense of “justice” or “justification,” but instead shows the degraded value of Arab bodies within the American military complex. In this manner, the play presents the findings of the report through the natural give and take of an interview, rather than
presenting the report itself, and uses the search for truth, such as it is in the situation, as the driving force for the action of the play, while letting the characters’ own words incriminate themselves. Despite this, Taguba still stands as the hero of the play, on an arduous journey, thereby making it the odd Iraq War play—aside from the stories of soldiers coming home—that has an American serviceman as the hero.19

At a time when many works about the occupation of Iraq choose easy sloganeering or pandering to the audiences’ preconceptions of the American role in the region, Khamis uses the American government’s own investigations into the allegations of torture to create a condemnation of the torture that occurred at Abu Gharib. After all, while the report does focus on the structural problems at Abu Gharib, some of the acts it describes, such as the allegations of sodomy and that of “breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees” move beyond the images commonly seen on the news (Taguba 17). Additionally, by using the military investigation into the events that occurred at Abu Gharib as the focus of the play, Khamis implicitly focuses attention on the fact that the Egyptian government did not run similar investigations into torture in its own prisoners during the Mubarak era, and was also one of the places that the American government sent detainees to be tortured in manners that evaded American law both before and after the Office of Legal Counsel’s memos. Aside from the fact that this means that 

Fadayehat Abu Gharib

will not likely see an Egyptian stage anytime soon, it

19 Such a representation is not, however, out-of-place in Egyptian art and culture. For example, the film 

Excuse Us,

perhaps the second most famous Egyptian comedic film about the invasion of Iraq, behind The Fall of Baghdad, tells the story of an Egyptian, Armouty, who must travel to Baghdad to rescue his son, Wahid, after Wahid is taken captive by the Americans shortly after their invasion, while he is attempting to sell mangoes. In the film, Armouty is eventually taken captive as well, and is on the verge of being “tortured” by a woman resembling Lynndie England who begins removing her shirt—an interesting inversion of the Abu Ghraib pictures, released a year before the film. However, Armouty ends up being rescued by an American Marine, who Armouty had befriended earlier in the film at the café Armouty owned in the shadow of the Pyramids. While this film has little artistic merit, it does provide a good glimpse at the complex relationship between many Egyptians and America—or the idea of America. In fact, during the end of the Bush Administration, I was often told, “We love your country; we love your people; we don’t like your President.”
also presents another example of how a foreign text can be used in a way that neither works in lieu of native artistic productions, especially given how heavily adapted the Taguba Report was in this case, nor in exclusion of local concerns, but instead to confront the issues of the local community in a highly censored artistic climate. As Janelle Reinelt writes in “Notes on a Radical Democratic Theater,

[T]he optimal relationship between theater and society is one in which theater, as a cultural practice, has an active role to play in the discovery, construction, maintenance, and critique of forms of sociality appropriate to that society. When the goal is a radical democracy, this involves intervening in the imaginative life of the society by producing meditations on its current balance of equality with liberty. (282)

For progressive Egyptian artists, the goal clearly had been to challenge the structure of “liberty” and “equality” within their country. At the time of Khamis’ writing, Egypt’s name-only “democracy” was seemingly perpetually struggling with dictatorship in the face of rigged elections that attempted to legitimize the Mubarak regime. Given this political oppression, the play endeavors to use the imaginative space of the theater to question how that affects the lives of those living within the culture, and those affected by the nation’s alliance with the United States. In the end, the victims of Egypt’s security state torture would remind Mubarak of what popular, grassroots democracy looked like, rather than cynical “democratic” police state procedures and “free.” economies. In the meantime, Khamis made use of those texts available to accomplish the goal of interrogating systems of torture within a regulated framework.

At the same time, Khamis oddly chooses, at least from what is cited at the end of the text, to focus his analysis on information pulled from sources at least four years old. One problem
with this is that he misses the 2007 revelation that Taguba never spoke with Rumsfeld until just before their Senate testimonies after the report had been written (Hersh, “General’s”). This, though, represents a mild fictionalizing in order to create an introduction to the story being told. But the selection of sources also prevents access to later reports about the pervasive nature of the tactics used at Abu Ghraib in a number of other American military institutions and avoids any discussion of the various instances of homicide and sodomy that would later be revealed, even though these have important parallels within the Egyptian prison complex. In fact, the last of these crimes also has eerie resonances with the most famous act of torture in Egyptian art, as well as a recent case involving Egyptian police.

**Popular Culture and Torture Iconography**

The first of these images involves the film *The Yacoubian Building*, which was released to much anticipation, acclaim, and controversy in 2006. At the time, it was the most expensive film produced in Egyptian history. It was also based on Alaa al-Aswany’s novel of the same name—the largest selling Arabic-language novel of the past decade. Additionally, it was filled with major stars, such as Adel Iman (the most famous actor in the Arab world), Youssra, and Nour el-Sherif, as well as the cinematic debut of Iman’s son, Mohammad Iman.\(^{20}\) The film delved into issues of poverty, government corruption, religion and secularism, and, particularly, homosexuality in ways presented as highly controversial within the context of rising conservatism in Egypt and state censorship of films. The vast majority of this controversy was pinpointed at the depiction of homosexuality—officially still banned from Egyptian arts—as

\(^{20}\) One has to wonder if the film could have been made without such stars—and Adel Iman’s character being on screen longer than any other—and much longer than the homosexual character. As Mohamed el-Assyouti writes, “Perhaps the most damaging compromise, allowing the film to become a vehicle for Iman and his son, was necessary for it to be made in the first place.”
well as a vague sense of the film portraying Egypt badly. In fact, independent MP Mustafa Bakri declared, “This film is spreading obscenity and debauchery, which is totally against Egyptian moral values. As a citizen, I felt hurt when I watched it.” Bakri also critiqued the “unneeded embarrassing details and obscene shots that would sympathise with those harbouring homosexual inclinations” (Shahine). Furthermore, there were reports of people walking out of movie theaters during the scenes depicting homosexuality (as well as reports of most of the audience staying) (Shahine, Salama). Meanwhile, director Marwan Hamed claimed that the attention to the homosexuality in the film was an effort to divert audience’s thoughts from the portrayal of corruption within the film. One of these depictions, as it turned out, involved a young protester being held down and sodomized by Egyptian secret police after he refuses to answer their questions.

*The Yacoubian Building* tells the story of a number of families living in an apartment complex near Midan Talaat Harb in central Cairo. Less discussed than the depictions of homosexuality and poverty, however, is the narrative involving the character of Taha, played by Mohammad Iman. In both book and film, Taha represents one of the most tragic characters, a young college student, in love with one of his neighbors, who dreams of becoming a police

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21 Generally, “independent” is a moniker for Muslim Brotherhood candidates, who were officially banned under Mubarak, but ran as independents, at one point holding 20 percent of the Parliamentary seats. Bakri is also known for having criticized the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar Mohamed Said Tantawi for banning the niqab at al-Azhar classes and dorms (both of which are gender segregated) and for declaring upon Saddam Hussein’s execution, “I felt it was my own head being placed in the noose” ("Egypt," “Egyptian”).

22 Had they stayed for the entirety of the film, these audience members would have found that, of the two characters that were depicted in a homosexual relationship, one had his child die and the other was murdered by another man he brought home with him while in despair over losing his previous lover. This would hardly seem a progressive depiction of homosexuality. Meanwhile, while Khaled El Sawy, who plays gay journalist Hatem Rashid in the film, is clearly proud of his role, he is also quick to point out that he is not gay himself: “I agreed to do the part because I had confidence in my fans. My features and my previous roles all make it clear that I am heterosexual, so there was nothing to scare me away from the role” (Soltan). Of course, it’s also fair to argue that El Sawy’s play about the invasion of Iraq, *El Lab fel Demagh* (discussed in a later chapter) was actually equally, if not more, controversial than this performance, even if it existed on a smaller scale.
officer, but, instead is spurned because his father works as a boab. This news drives Taha toward religious extremism through connections with a shadowy, unnamed Islamist group and study with that group’s Imam. These connections cause him to grow distant from his childhood love, who does not wear the hijab, and, instead, to lead a protest on Cairo University’s campus.

When the students break through the gates of the University, the police move in and begin beating and arresting the protesters, eventually catching Taha after he attempts to escape through a nearby park. In the following scenes, we are shown Taha’s childhood love going to work for an older man, Taha’s home being searched, and then Taha blindfolded, bloodied, and dangling in a secret police facility. In prison, his interrogator tells him, “Taha, I promise no one will touch you, and you will go free, but you have to talk…to which group do you belong?” Taha replies, “I don’t have a group.” The questioning continues through a discussion of the books in Taha’s home, leading to Taha saying, “I was only participating in the demonstration,” for which he is immediately slapped. The interrogator then references the homosexual journalist at the center of one of the other storylines, leading to the declaration: “We’ll do to you what they do to Hatem Rashid [the homosexual character], and we have people that do this very well, what do you say?” Taha remains silent. The interrogator then orders for Taha’s clothes to be removed, followed by a close cut of Taha’s face against a wall, still bloodied and blindfolded screaming, “No.” The camera pans out, fades to black, then cuts to Taha alone in a cell, naked, crying, and saying, “O, God.” When Taha next appears, he is at a diner with the Imam, first telling him that he did not say anything to the police, then that he wants revenge, and finally declaring, “They raped me.”

23 A boab is best understood as a hybrid between a doorman and a superintendent. Within the narrative, the significance is that Taha is rejected from the police force because he is poor, despite being immaculately qualified in all other characteristics.

24 Interestingly, as the students break through the gate, a shot of a burning Israeli flag is shown. Geographically, the Israeli embassy is only about a mile from Cairo University’s campus, straight down the road to the Nile that Taha is seen running down, and protesters from the university are never allowed, in general, off campus, and, specifically, to travel toward the embassy.
This inspires the Imam to take Taha to an Islamist militia training camp, where Taha undergoes terrorist training and marries the sister of one of the other followers. In the end, Taha is seen shooting the man who interrogated him, before finally being shot down in the road himself.

On its surface, the Taha narrative, like most in the film, both tackles complicated issues and maintains a degree of absurdity and melodrama. On one hand, the idea of a high-ranking secret police officer being gunned down in the streets of Cairo during Mubarak’s reign stretches the bounds of credulity. However, the representation of how torture and militant violence cycle—a narrative as old in North African cinema as The Battle of Algiers—presents an important tale given the repressive methods used by the Egyptian state, particularly since Taha becomes radicalized through his rejection from the police force and militarized through having been tortured. Interestingly, this representation of torture is actually dulled within the film from how it is presented in the book, wherein Alaa al-Aswany describes Taha being kicked by boots and having police dogs turned on him, before finally concluding,

As though this were a secret signal, no sooner had the officer finished saying the words than the blows rained down on Taha from all sides. Then they threw him face down on the ground and several hands started to remove his gallabiya and pull off his underclothes. He resisted with all his might but they set upon him and held his body down with their hands and feet. Two thick hands reached down, grabbed his buttocks, and pulled them apart. He felt a solid object being stuck into his rear and breaking the tendons inside and he started screaming. He screamed at the top of his voice. He screamed until he felt that his larynx was being ripped open. (153)

25 While the Egyptian government fought Islamist militias, most of this had been confined to areas south of Cairo and in the Sinai, and much contemporary violence tended to be targeted at tourist sites—such as the bombings in Khan al-Khalili, Sharm al-Sheik, and Taba over the past decade—and even this violence is relatively rare.
The specificity of the method of torture used on Taha is striking, particularly given the news that would come out of Egypt shortly after the film’s release.

In November 2006, less than a half year after *The Yacoubian Building* opened in Egypt, and as the film was traveling through the circuit of fall European film festivals, Egyptian bloggers “posted a video showing a man naked from the waist down being sodomized with a stick,” a video, like many others involving the Egyptian police and torture, that is still readily available online (Al-Magd). Two police officers were jailed for the offense—though, as with Abu Ghraib—no one with any authority was punished. Perhaps even more telling was the eerie parallel in methods not only between film and life, but across various regimes of torture among allied countries in the Middle East. While the Egyptian police most assuredly did not learn to torture after becoming allied with the Americans, years before the video had been released to blogs, reports came out of Egypt noting the influence of Abu Ghraib on Egyptian interrogators. As reporter Emad Mekay noted in 2004, just weeks after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, “Several lawyers and human rights groups told IPS [Inter Press Service] in phone interviews over the past two weeks that the Egyptian State Security Police used methods that mirrored those in Abu Ghraib, like stripping some detainees naked—a rare practice in Egyptian prisons, even though the country has a long record of human rights abuses and prison torture.” Mekay also reported that “the Abu Ghraib way” had become the new term for a procedure “in which soldiers would use electricity on [a prisoner’s] penis and anus,” writing that soldiers would also compare their torture methods to those reported to have been used in Abu Ghraib. Perhaps most tellingly, Mekay quotes Hafez Abu Seeda, secretary general of the Egyptian Human Rights Organization, saying, “The Abu Ghraib practices actually left a major impact in the region. We noted that there is an increase in torture practices before which we documented. It is my opinion that Abu
Ghraib emboldened and made torture more brazen here.” Thus, torture in Egypt created part of the justification for invading Iraq, and the invasion of Iraq created legitimacy for torture in Egypt.26

Allowable Resistance

Unfortunately, focusing on the aspects of Abu Ghraib that made the news, without a sense of the broader context in which the American torture policy—and the Egyptian engagement of it—existed removes a sense of the broader culpability of the agents involved. While Khamis’ play does show General Karpinsky and Donald Rumsfeld, it does not examine the broader political and economic context, discussed in the previous chapter, in which Abu Ghraib exists, nor does it make the clear connection between American and Egyptian regimes of torture, though, in Khamis’ defense, the latter of these contexts would never be allowed on an Egyptian stage.

Al-Dwery’s production, on the other hand, does send the criticism up the chain of command, showing broad cultural and political culpability, particularly through the juxtaposition of domestic and torture spaces, though the ends for such, other than the maintenance of power, are unclear—perhaps a consequence of the specific circumstances in which Buero Vallejo originally wrote his play. The abstraction allows for a broader criticism of multiple torture contexts and those who gain by them, while, at the same time, resists naming any actors outside of the world of the play. Presumably, any work that did so would never reach an Egyptian stage,

26 This is not particularly surprising, as Darius Rejali argues that public monitoring has led to a system of “clean techniques” that have moved from democratic contexts—Britain, France, and America—where there is public pressure to not (or at least not to see) torture outward to other countries (xvii). Given that Egypt was under both France and British occupation in the last two hundred years and has been a recipient of extensive American patronage in the past thirty years, it would seem natural, in light of Rejali’s analysis, that similar torture techniques would be used between the countries, especially in the latter era where America would prefer “clean” techniques that would not show evidence of its rendition programs.
thus placing specific limits on what may be accomplished, while also replicating previous struggles in human rights discourse, specifically the politically neutral stances of some rights organizations.\footnote{The specifics of how literature and torture/human rights discourses interrelate has been taken up in works such as Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg’s \textit{Beyond Terror} and, particularly, Joseph R. Slaughter’s \textit{Human Rights, Inc.}, which argues that both human rights discourses and the \textit{Bildungsroman} regulate the individual into the social order. However, both works do not engage theatric performances and both primarily engage novels and films aimed at Western audiences, a very different context than Egyptians performing for Egyptians and risking their own arrest in the process.} Inevitably, defining the victim of torture becomes much easier than naming the individual or structural source of that torture, given the risk of torture to those who do so. At the same time, though the works that are discussed here seem more interested in the political structures that produce torture than the pain of torture.\footnote{Elaine Scarry made a similar point long ago: \begin{quote} Physical pain—to invoke what is at this moment its single most familiar attribute—is language destroying. Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner’s voice. (19-20) \end{quote}} It would also seem that, perhaps even more effective for the Mubarak regime, the threat of torture also had the ability to erase certain aspects of artists’ voices, not only limiting who they would name as the purveyors of torture and what systems—as well as relationships between them—they were willing to put on stage.

Given this risk, there is little opportunity for an artist within Egypt to make this broader argument. In fact, it seems remarkable that the scene in \textit{The Yacoubian Building} was even allowed, even if sanitized from the novel, though it was aided by the famous cast and expensive budget, as well as the difficulty of banning film.\footnote{Egypt, like most Middle Eastern countries, has extensive black market distribution of films, both in terms of those currently in cinemas, and those that will not be screened. The Internet, of course, also expands the availability of film, though only to a certain economic sector. Perhaps more telling, though, is the difficulty of banning a film bound to receive international acclaim. This was attempted with the 2009 release \textit{Ain Shams}, a work initially banned in Egypt that received attention at international film festivals, eventually placing pressure on the Egyptian government to allow its domestic release. For film, this works well; however, transporting an entire theater company around the world to garner attention, rather than a DVD, is much more complicated. Additionally, some space for criticism in film has always been allowed in order to continue the illusion of democracy. For example, the 2008 comedy \textit{Hassan wa Marqoos}, about another taboo—the tension between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt—contains a line where a general tells a group of journalists after a terrorist attack, “Thank God there were no human casualties, just a few cars and a few shops were destroyed. Three injured and seventy-five people were}
even more limited, given that a play about torture would not likely perform as the kind of commercial work that would attract Adel Imam or Mohamed Sobhy, nor the kind of funding that *The Yacoubian Building* did. As noted, *Fadayehat Abu Gharib* has yet to be staged. Additionally, though Tarek al-Dwery’s adaptation of *The Double Life of Doctor Valmy* did reach the stage, it only ran for two weeks before its successful run was cut short, and Dr. Hoda Wasfi, the director of al-Hanagar Theatre where it was performed, has said that she received daily calls from those within the Ministry of Culture questioning her decision to allow the play to run—a run that the Ministry had approved for one of its theaters—and implying that it would be wise to discontinue it. Typically, a member of the secret police also visited the production each night. Talking to members of the company that performed the work. I was also repeatedly told that they went on stage scared each night that they might eventually be arrested for their involvement in the production—undoubtedly another reason for the short run. Though contemporary Egypt has more of a tradition of banning works than arresting the performers and writers, the memory of artists sent to prison under Sadat is not far buried, and the regular arrests of protesters and bloggers within Egypt also makes this a real fear. Lastly, within months of the run of al-Dwery’s production, the Hanagar was closed for amorphous “safety renovations.” When it reopened, against the will of the Egyptian government, in October 2008, these renovations were as yet uncompleted, with loose wires, holes in some parts of the ceiling, and the café floor still ripped up—this despite the two years the government had to complete them. While the use of foreign texts might allow artists to move past the initial line of the censors, it does not entirely shield...
them from the state apparatus once it eventually realizes what the plays being performed are actually addressing. Even more disturbing is the possibility that allowing short runs of these texts allowed the government to present itself as open to critique at the same time that it silenced domestic dissent. After all, given the limited number of people who would see a play in a two-week run, the negative impact to the government would be limited, while the materials of the production (posters, fliers, tickets, et cetera)—a false representation of free speech—would still be present to hold up any time the government was accused of imprisoning dissenting voices.

Given this, what Egyptian artists have been left with are a series of works, each of which only tells part of the story of torture in Egypt and the United States. While Yacoubian shows the Egyptian secret police, this was not an option for al-Dwery, if his play were to be produced, nor does it fall under the purview of Abu Ghraib for Khamis, given his focus on the Taguba Report, and even Yacoubian does not examine the broader context by which state torture in Egypt is funded and protected. Meanwhile, the theater artists are left turning toward foreign texts with the hope that their audiences can make the necessary parallels. Dimaa ala Malabis al-Sahrah does imply that one character was raped by the interrogators, but the adaptation never names the actual agency. And while Fadayet Abu Ghraib does name those responsible for the torture, because Khamis only uses the earlier reporting on Abu Ghraib for his sources, the most violent acts committed are not discussed within the play, thereby causing it to replicate the elisions in the public debate over torture. Through this process, the state censorship in Egypt creates an illusion of political theater, where an image of free speech is presented, and where artists can make an attempt to protest the violences of their government, so long as they never name the people responsible for the acts, the acts committed, and the context in which they were committed all within the same work.
Though Gayatri Spivak has famously noted, “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more” (qtd. in Dahl 38), what are we to do if the subaltern speaks in the voice of another culture? While, the use of foreign texts might provide the opportunity to draw parallels to local political circumstances, to circumvent censors, and to critique Western powers in their own voices, it also replaces the voice of local dissent with an external voice, thereby replicating the same systems of power that one intends to protest in the first place, and it might even replicate an entirely miscast debate. Perhaps this is unfair criticism in circumstances, such as the ones discussed here, where government powers make it nearly impossible for locally-written, non-comedic political dramas to reach the stage. And, certainly, this concern also begs a greater consideration in future scholarship for the place of agency within works where Egyptian performers are performing non-Egyptian works for Egyptian audiences. For now, it is at least worth considering the risk of reifying the same systems of power that one intends to resist when the language of one’s protest is imported.

This having been said, both Tarek el-Dwery’s production of *The Double Life of Doctor Valmy* and Youssri Khamis’ *Fadayehat Abu Gharib* provide examples of a middle-space in how we can approach the adoption of foreign texts in the global south. At a point when it is still too easy to assume that foreign adaptations are used to avoid local issues or to reverse the cultures that created them, both works provide examples of how the adaptation of foreign materials can be used to speak in brave and powerful ways to the problems of the local culture, especially within complex systems of regulation and foreign entanglement.
Forty-five Minutes that Changed the World: The September Dossier, British Drama, and the New Journalism

September 24, 2002. Just over a year after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and just under two weeks after American President George W. Bush implored the United Nations to take a stand against Iraq, the British Labour government released a dossier analyzing Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction capabilities. On its surface, the dossier presented no new information of significance, as much of the intelligence collected was culled from United Nations reports and other public documents, though, as former Sunday Telegraph executive editor Con Coughlin writes, “British intelligence had never before been asked to produce a public document, and the authority of British intelligence had never before been called upon to justify government action” (Coughlin 245). As it turns out, this public justification would not go as British intelligence would have liked, for two primary problems. The first problem came when the dossier claimed that Iraq had sought “significant quantities of uranium from Africa”—a claim that would cause much debate in the United States after Bush repeated it in his 2003 State of the Union Address—and the second came with the assertion that Iraq’s WMD could be ready to for attack within forty-five minutes (American Ally, “Full Text”). The latter of these allegations was particularly stressed in Britain because Prime Minister Tony Blair highlighted it in his foreword to the dossier, writing, “[T]he document discloses that his [Saddam Hussein’s] military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them” (“Prime”). Interestingly, though, Coughlin notes in American Ally, his analysis of the relationship between Blair and the American
presidency, that what the dossier actually claimed Iraq could do with those WMD was more nuanced:

What it said, in two separate and distinct items, was first, that ‘some of the WMD’ could be ready “within 45 minutes of an order to use them,” and second, that Iraq was attempting to build a ballistic missile that had a range capable of hitting Cyprus, as well as a number of key American military bases in the Gulf region. At no point did the dossier say that Iraq had the capability to fit WMD warheads to its missile systems. The forty-five minute intelligence related solely to battlefield munitions, such as mortars and rockets, although this was not explained in the dossier…Such distinctions, however, did not seem to unduly concern Downing Street in the autumn of 2002. (Coughlin 248-9)

Nor did such distinctions concern the British press, which drew a linear connection between WMD and ballistic missiles. Nowhere was this more pronounced than at Rupert Murdoch’s The Sun, which ran the headline, “Brits 45 Mins from Doom,” along with a photo of tourists at a beach resort in Cyprus and the lead, written by the “Deputy Political Editor,” “BRITISH servicemen and tourists in Cyprus could be annihilated by germ warfare missiles launched by Iraq, it was revealed yesterday” (Pascoe-Watson). Though The Sun hardly represents a venue for hard news, “even the distinguished defense correspondent of the Times, which was widely regarded as Britain’s newspaper of record, offered a similar report, writing that Saddam’s missiles could hit British military bases in Cyprus in just forty-five minutes” (Coughlin 248).

This turned out to be incorrect. Eight years into the Iraq War, with no substantial WMD discovered, we know that Iraq would not have been able to carry out a WMD attack on Kuwait City, let alone Cyprus. In Britain, where skepticism toward the invasion of Iraq always ran high,
it did not take eight years for the claims of the September Dossier, as it came to be known, to be dissected. On May 29, 2004, Andrew Gilligan, then defense correspondent for the BBC, filed a report claiming that the dossier had been “sexed up” and that “the government probably knew that that 45 minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in,” as well as arguing that Alastair Campbell, Blair’s then Director of Communications and Strategy had pushed for the inclusion of the forty-five minute claim (“Full Text”). Looking back, such a claim does not seem inherently radical. In fact, Coughlin writes that “both the French and German intelligence agencies had access to material similar to that of SIS and CIA on Iraq, and government officials in Paris and Berlin were well aware that the more lurid claims being made about Saddam’s WMD capability in the British press could not be substantiated by the known evidence” (Coughlin 246-7) and that this particular piece of intelligence was treated with a degree of derision by the CIA, where George Tenet, the director, took to calling it the ‘they-can-attack-in-forty-five-minutes shit.’ The CIA had strong reservations about the reliability of the new SIS agent who had provided the intelligence in the first place, and warned London not to rely too heavily on the new information. (249)

Likewise, the forty-five minute claim, as it turns out, relied entirely on one source with no direct access to Saddam Hussein or his closest advisors (“Full Text,” Coughlin).

Unfortunately, Gilligan’s reporting also relied solely on a single Downing Street source, Minister of Defence employee and former UN weapons inspector David Kelly, who both claimed that his information to Gilligan did not substantiate all of Gilligan’s claims about the dossier and had his name made public before committing suicide in July 2003, around the time Robert Novak was naming Valerie Plame, setting off a parallel, though slower developing,
scandal in the United States (Spencer).\(^1\) In the end, this series of events, one of many narratives surrounding the Iraq war and the intelligence that enabled the war, would lead to the August 2003 Hutton Inquiry in Britain, an attempt to explore Kelly’s death that also engaged pre-war intelligence and the reporting of the BBC. And it is with the Hutton inquiry that dramatic historiographies of the nascent Iraq War began to make their way to the British stage, and, in particular, the debate over the forty-five-minutes claim stood before a new judge: theatrical audiences.

The first of these engagements came through the play *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*, one of many Tribunal plays\(^2\), which stage various trials and inquiries in Britain, performed by the Tricycle Theatre in recent years. *Justifying War*, which premiered on October 30, 2003, less than two months after the Hutton Inquiry finished hearing testimonies, is composed entirely of direct quotes from the transcripts of the Hutton Inquiry, which went unaired on television, though limited witnesses were allowed into the galleries (Norton-Taylor 6-7, Spencer). Nearly a year later, on September 1, 2004, David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* opened. While not nearly as focused as *Justifying War*—*Stuff Happens* takes a multinational and longer view of the lead-up to the Iraq War—Hare’s play does also engage the debate over the inclusion of the intelligence about the forty-five minutes threat (Hare, unnumbered front pages). Additionally, because Hare’s work mixes public quotations with fictionalized scenes of backroom conversations, his play provides an alternative and complimentary view of the debate showcased within *Justifying War*. Taken in tandem, then, the two plays provide a dynamic method to examine the works that Peter Preston, in a less than positive take on documentary

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\(^1\) On July 14, 2003, Robert Novak named Valerie Plame as a CIA agent in his column for *The Washington Post*, scuttling her career with the CIA. Many saw this as an attempt on the part of the White House to exact revenge on her husband, former diplomat Joe Wilson, for critiquing Bush Administration policies.

\(^2\) Among other Tribunal plays are *Bloody Sunday* (206), about the Saville Inquiry into the shootings of protesters in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1972, and *The Colour of Justice*, about the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.
theatre in Britain, referred to as “the new journalism,” while, at the same time, helping to establish a counter metanarrative for the representation of the failure of journalism in fictional British drama, such as in Colin Teevan’s *How Many Miles to Basra?*. However, as will be seen when these plays are placed within an analysis of critical historiography and ethnographic performance, as discussed by theorists such as Hayden White, Dwight Conquergood, and Joni Jones, they do not inherently solve the problems of journalistic representation, but, instead, provide an alternative slant and realm of criticism to that in more traditional forms of journalism.

The Writing of History

Before considering the plays themselves, a brief examination of critical historiography would appear appropriate in order to situate the works ideologically, as well as historically, particularly considering the battle over pre-war intelligence, whether it be played out at 10 Downing Street, the BBC, the Hutton Inquiry, or London theatre, serves as a reminder of Fredric Jameson’s claim that “interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict” (13). While Jameson, at least in this quote, is primarily concerned with literary interpretation, his metaphor, like Benjamin’s angel tearing through the past, presents a stark reminder of the violence that remains always-already a part of historiography, and, in particular, those historiographies that engage contemporary political discourse, especially that discourse meant to create a literal battlefield through its interpretation(s) of intelligence texts. But, of course, the debate over the forty-five minutes occurred not simply because of the fallacy in the intelligence, nor the fallacy in the reporting of the intelligence, but the fallacy in the reporting of the fallacy of the reporting of the fallacy in the making of the dossier. The historical moment, not just the
plays or the newspapers, presents a chance to examine what history is in the first place. As Hayden White notes in his study of historical narrativizing, *The Content and the Form*,

In order to qualify as historical, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for this historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition upon its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess. (20)

If White is right—and I like to believe that he is—that dissonance is the nature of historiography and, by extension, that coherence only exists in myth, then what should surprise us is not that Tony Blair didn’t know exactly what was going on with the WMD in Iraq or that Andrew Gilligan didn’t know exactly what was going on at 10 Downing Street—or that I, perhaps, have little knowledge what either were ever thinking—but that the public would ever invest such credence in their attempt at intelligence/journalism/historiography.³ Unfortunately, though, we live in a world that likes its absolutes, that does better swinging between the extremities of utter truth and utter fabrication than exploring the grey areas between. Thus, the question to ask of the New Journalism of the theatre is perhaps not whether or not it is more accurate than the Old Journalism of print and TV, although that might be a fair starting question, but whether the theatre provides a space for a more critical historiography than the Old Journalism, and whether *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* attempt to create a metahistory of the intelligence that preceded the Iraq War.

³ For my purposes here, it’s worth considering that journalism—and, to a certain extent, foreign intelligence—is little more than historiography of current events.
Staging Testimony

Of course, as to the first of these questions (accuracy), *Justifying War* rests safely on the fact that the text of the play is taken from the transcripts of the Hutton Inquiry, thus making the source of the dialogue easily verifiable. However, the Hutton Inquiry heard testimony for twenty-five days, while *Justifying War* had an initial run-time of approximately two-and-a-half hours, raising the question of how the testimony was shaped and what kind of impression of the debate over the forty-five minutes and the BBC coverage the play presents (Billington, “Justifying”).

First and foremost in any such analysis of documentary drama that contains contemporary figures, it is worth considering the effects and ethics of performing a living person. As Dwight Conquergood writes in “A Sense of the Other,”

Performance of another living person’s story is a humbling and paradoxical experience. When the ethnographer becomes performer, he or she comes closest toward entering the world of the other, while being aware simultaneously that he or she will never be that other. The reach through performance towards grasping the meaning of “the other” always falls short and must be attempted with humility. (154).

Although this kind of attempt at humility and striving for “accuracy” is difficult in any context, it might be even more difficult in the political context that works such as *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* explore than in the more traditional ethnographic framework that Conquergood writes of. This is both because the kind of extended, less guarded interviews that ethnographers aim for are more difficult within political circles, and because the performance of political figures can more easily fall into facile caricatures, since their public lives always-already exist as hyperreal
performativity. Despite these risks, Charles Spencer noted of the original London production of *Justifying War* that “William Chubb is possibly more persuasive than the man himself as Andrew Gilligan, Kenneth Bryans leaves little doubt that Geoff Hoon is a cold, calculating buck-passer, David Michaels scarily captures the pent-up fury and menace of Alastair Campbell, while Roland Oliver presents Andrew Mackinlay MP as a positively Dickensian figure of furious self-importance.” Similarly, Michael Billington, in his *Guardian* review, writes, “Unemphatically staged by Nicolas Kent and containing particularly good performances from Roland Oliver as Mackinlay, David Michaels as Alastair Campbell and William Hoyland as Dr Jones, this is in no sense kangaroo-court theatre” (Billington, “Justifying”). Whether good acting and good performance of another are inherently the same remains an open question. However, it would appear, that, at least in the initial run, the performances of *Justifying War* attempted to create the characters within the play, regardless of their individual politics, with respect and dignity.

What becomes equally interesting to consider, then, is the sequencing and selection of events within the play, which, like the actual hearing, begins with a one-minute moment of silence (Fisher). As the above quotes also indicate, the three focal presentations are those of Andrew Gilligan, Alastair Campbell, and Janice Kelly, the widow of David Kelly. The first of this trio to appear in the play is the one who interviewed David Kelly as an anonymous source in the first place, Andrew Gilligan. Initially, the questioning presented in the play presents an analysis of Gilligan’s reporting on the September Dossier, with Gilligan answering a question regarding his interview with Kelly by noting, “Well I was surprised [that Kelly had mentioned Campbell] and I said: What, you know, Campbell made it up? They made it up? And he said: No, it was real information but it was unreliable and it was in the dossier against our wishes”

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4 Interview-based performer Anna Deavere Smith noted the same of her attempt to conduct interviews in Washington, D.C., “[It] was a place…where people rephrased my questions a lot” (qtd. in Cheakalos).
Later, Gilligan remains equally pointed while giving a summary analysis of the dossier, declaring, “So there are inconsistencies in this document; and in all cases it was the harder—the firmer statement, that they actually had weapons rather than just the ability to produce weapons. Those are the statements that make it into the executive summary, into the Prime Minister’s foreword” (16). Through such statements, Gilligan attempts to position himself as a meticulous and accurate reporter. However, when the content of his original BBC broadcasts comes up, the direction of the inquiry shifts: “Well, I never returned to the form of words I used in the 6.07 broadcast,” Gilligan responds when asked if he withdrew the allegation that the Labour government willfully misrepresented information before Kelly died.

“Subsequent broadcasts were scripted. The word I used in the 7.32 broadcast, the scripted one, was ‘questionable,’ which I am happier with” (19). But a journalist cannot remove his words from public debate, even with a retraction, and the play underscores this by showing Gilligan’s testimony ending with Gilligan shifting the responsibility for the turmoil in Kelly’s life back to Kelly: “I mean, I think he was pretty experienced at dealing with journalists; I cannot speculate on what Dr. Kelly may have felt but he was experienced with journalists” (22). Through such moments, Gilligan’s historiography, as presented within the play, shapes a narrative in which Gilligan appropriately used a source in search of the truth, though with little remorse over the end results for that source. Campbell, though, would have a harsher take on Gilligan’s reporting.

In fact, Campbell takes on the BBC directly in the section of the inquiry presented in the play, first claiming, with more than a bit of political flair, “[O]ur perception was that BBC viewers and listeners were at times being given a sense of moral equivalence between the democratically elected governments that were involved on one side and the Iraqi regime on the
other” (Norton-Taylor 44). Additionally, regarding Gilligan’s May 29, 2003 report, Campbell tells the inquiry,

I was torn, really, because on the one hand, I did not imagine anyone would have taken them terribly seriously, because it is such an extraordinary thing to say, that the Prime Minister and the Government would do that. Given my close involvement in the production of the dossier, I knew the allegations to be false. The reason why I then got more concerned as the day wore on was because shortly after the Prime Minister spoke to British troops when we were in Basra it was clear to me that the traveling press party were frankly more interested in this BBC story than they were in what the Prime Minister had been saying to the troops and his visit to Iraq. (44-5)

Thus, the play not only displays Campbell directly contradicting Gilligan—a standard moment of courtroom drama—but also shows Campbell later arguing that the government had to release Kelly’s name in order to counter the bad reporting by the BBC, thus laying Kelly’s death squarely at Gilligan’s feet. In fact, Campbell’s political calculating is scripted so starkly that his end statement, especially depending on how an actor plays it onstage, of sympathy for Kelly rings severely hollow: “I just wanted to say that I think, like everybody, I have found it very distressing that Dr. Kelly who, was clearly somebody of distinction, had died in this way and obviously I have, like everybody I am sure has thought very, very deeply about the background to all this. So I think all I would say is that I just find it very, very sad” (48). Regardless of the merit of such a statement, the play does present a dual perspective on Gilligan’s coverage of the September Dossier, as well as the actual information presented in it, and leaves the decision as to which man to trust to the audience.
Or it would, if not for ending with Janice Kelly’s testimony, the one testimony that breaks the chronological order of the actual Hutton Inquiry (Taylor). Likewise, while Janice Kelly’s testimony serves, in structural terms, as the end of the play, it also provides the play’s personal face and moral center, since Kelly stands outside of the backdoor binary of the BBC and Downing Street testimonies. Instead, she reminds the audience of the experience of someone without the clout of Gilligan or Campbell, when she tells of her husband’s name being made public: “Well, he did not know about it until after it had happened. So he was—I think initially he had been led to believe that it would not go into the public domain. He had received assurances and that is why he was so very upset about it” (Norton-Taylor 88). Additionally, while Gilligan and Campbell both retained their jobs at the time of their testimonies, Janice Kelly’s testimony stands as a reminder of why the inquiry had been called in the first place, and of the loss to her family, when she states, of the last day she saw her husband, “Oh, I just thought he had a broken heart. He looked as though he had shrunk, but I had no idea at that stage of what he might do later, absolutely no idea at all. He could not put two sentences together. He could not talk at all” (92). Certainly, this moment struck home the hardest to the critics. Paul Taylor, in his Independent review, wrote,

The painstaking verisimilitude of the staging, with its plasma screens flashing up all manner of documents, is matched by the documentary accuracy that even reproduces the fluctuating drift in the voice link-up with Mrs Kelly. A virtue of dramatic reconstruction is that it can alert you to details that fall through the net in day-to-day newspaper coverage. I shall never forget the brief, harrowing silence at the other end of the line before Mrs Kelly, hitherto steady and stoic, confirms that the painkiller her husband used was the medication that she takes for arthritis.
Likewise, Charles Spencer noted in *The Daily Telegraph*, “As we listen to the testimony of Kelly's wife Janice at the end…we are made keenly aware that the fascinating insight into public affairs afforded by the Hutton Inquiry was the result of a desperate personal tragedy.”

The reordering of Janice Kelly’s testimony certainly struck a powerful blow that could be read as an arch and manipulative move on the part of the play’s creators, but for the comment that Spencer ends his review with: “Campbell became a man dangerously obsessed, the BBC should have clarified Gilligan's reporting while backing the substance of his claims, and the process by which Kelly's name became public was a sick farce. But Kelly himself doesn't seem to have behaved entirely honourably either, and I suspect his awareness of the fact was one of the chief reasons for this decent and distinguished man's lonely death” (“Tragedy”). It would seem, then, that, despite the emotion of the final scene, the intellectual argument—that the government and the media failed in the lead-up to the Iraq War—remained clear, and perhaps was even reinforced by reminding the audience that the cost of political malfeasance is always personal pain, regardless of the terms of the public debate.

**Between Fact and Fiction**

While David Hare’s play *Stuff Happens* provides ample material for discussion, this analysis will necessarily limit itself to the single scene in which the forty-five minutes controversy presents itself. Before turning to this scene, though, a few distinctions between *Stuff Happens* and *Justifying War* should be made clear. First, Hare’s play takes the entirety of the lead-up to the Iraq War as its focus, moving between diplomats and heads of state in America, Britain, France, and elsewhere over a period of nearly two years leading up to and just after the invasion of Iraq. Additionally, Hare’s play does not consist entirely of what the British press has
begun calling verbatim theatre. Instead, *Stuff Happens* combines excerpts from public speeches with dramatized backroom conversations between real politicians and monologues from fictional characters, thus placing *Stuff Happens* at the center of the triangle that *Fanshen*, *Plenty*, and *The Permanent Way* make in the Hare oeuvre. Of course, in choosing to write scenes where the dialogue is unknown, Hare adds to the ethical dilemmas involved in performing another person, and some actors did easily fall into caricatures of those they portrayed on stage.\(^5\) Critic Gerald Berkowitz, for one, found this to especially be the case, not surprisingly, in the performances of the American politicians at the original London production:

> Like too many Europeans, he [Hare] presents President Bush (played by Alex Jennings) as simply an ignorant buffoon, while others, particularly among the Americans, are allowed to come across as cartoons. Vice President Cheney (Desmond Barrit) and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld (Dermot Crowley) are practically foaming at the mouth as hawks, while Condoleezza Rice (Adjoa Andoh) is a pushy - one might almost say uppity - woman constantly interrupting conversations to explain what the President means to say. (Berkowitz)

It would seem that distance makes the heart grow satiric. Certainly, this seemed to be Ben Brantley’s take upon watching the differences in the New York and London productions of *Stuff Happens*: “Mr. Sullivan [the director] appears to have encouraged his cast members, most of whom play multiple roles, to use their imaginations to draw characters taken from real life in deeper, more realistic detail, avoiding the editorial cartoon sneers and snarls of many of their London counterparts” (Brantley). Returning to Conquergood’s statement that “Performance of another living person’s story is a humbling and paradoxical experience,” it’s worth considering

\(^5\) It’s worth considering if this risk—and perhaps the structural imbalance—are why the Tricycle Theatre chose not to perform any of Tony Blair’s testimony to the Hutton Inquiry.
that taking the living person’s words away and replacing them with the playwright’s might also risk removing the actor’s anchor to a humble portrayal of that person, regardless of personal politics. At the same time, in watching the two productions, the British audience seemed to find the British characters, who also had exaggerated accents, more comical—particularly Tony Blair’s inability to stand up to the Americans—and the Americans more menacing. Likewise, the American production was also more critical of Secretary of State Colin Powell, the presumptive hero of the play, particularly when Powell’s French counterpart questions his motives, first by implying that the United States will not join the international criminal court because it is protecting Henry Kissinger, then by telling Powell, “You can’t play football and be the referee as well,” with regards to the Americans’ mixed messages over the efficacy of the United Nations.6

Of course, the scenes Hare writes in Stuff Happens, those of shifting political alliances behind closed doors on each side of the Atlantic, represent historical events whose narratives will never exist in transcripts for any actor to work into a Tricycle-esque performance. Thus, Hare’s perhaps inevitable September Dossier scene begins with Tony Blair declaring, “Really! I mean, really! I mean, come on!” to Campbell, British Ambassador to the United States David Manning, Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell, and Lord Chancellor Philip Bassett (Hare 62). Shortly thereafter, an intelligence spook reads an e-mail, noting, “Number Ten, through the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, wants the document to be as strong as possible within the bounds of available intelligence. This is therefore a last call for any items of intelligence agencies think can and should be included! Responses by 12:00 tomorrow” (62). Within a few lines Richard Dearlove, then head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, offers a new source,

6 Inevitably, this represents one of the problems in both reviews and videotapes of productions, or a single live viewing for that matter: they’re all tied to one night’s exposure to the flux of nightly performances and audience reactions.
with a minor caveat: “It isn’t corroborated. (Dearlove shifts.) This is highly unusual. As you know, I don’t usually like to depend on a single supplier. There are procedures,” then, after a brief exchange, “We have a source who is saying that the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within twenty to forty-five minutes of an order to do so” (63).

The scene then transitions to a brief exchange between Blair and Manning:

Manning: You asked for something. He brought it. That’s service, I suppose.

Blair considers the implications of this remark.

Blair: It’s an instinct, isn’t it? It’s a feeling.

Everyone waits for his decision.

What did he say? “Twenty to forty-five”?

Manning: Yes.

Blair: Use Forty-five. (64-5)

After a few more lines, The Evening Standard declares “Forty-five minutes to attack!” while George Tenet refers to the claim as, “The ‘they-can-attack-in-forty-five-minutes’ shit” (65).

Interestingly, regardless of the accuracy of the scene that Hare creates, he still comes to the same resolution that Coughlin would paint in the book-length study American Ally two years later. At the same time, Hare lays the blame for the misuse of the intelligence squarely at the feet—or in the mouth, as the case may be—of Tony Blair, showing that it was the Prime Minister’s choice to include the forty-five-minutes intelligence. As such, the fiction of Hare’s play becomes the counterbalance to the missing Prime Minister within Justifying War.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of public record and fiction within Hare’s play helps to throw the public record and accepted “facts” into question. This is not to say that Hare stands without blame for any misrepresentations in his own text about Iraq intelligence, but, that, regardless of
the verisimilitude within his creation of the debate over the forty-five minute claim, the intelligence itself was, as George Tenet might say, shit. Thus, the scene would seem to ask who is telling the bigger fiction: Hare or Blair?

Through this technique, *Justifying War* and *Stuff Happens* can stand as a necessary tandem in the discussion over the forty-five minute debate, with *Justifying War* bringing the unfilmed public record before the eyes of the audiences, while *Stuff Happens* attempts to shed light on the unseen private conversations of public officials, while, unlike the Old Journalism of Andrew Gilligan, owning up to the fictions of theatre’s New Journalism. All of which would make for a nice excuse to abandon one’s newspapers and televisions in favor of the theatre, if it were not for one small problem: the Hutton Inquiry actually ended, and it released its findings.

Performing in a Shifting Landscape

On January 28, 2004, a slightly delayed final report from Lord Hutton was made public, and it put more blame on the BBC than on the Labour government, noting that “the allegation reported by Mr. Gilligan on 29 May 2003 that the Government probably knew that the 45 minutes claim was wrong before the Government decided to put it in the dossier was an allegation which was unfounded” (Hutton). Despite this, during the hearing, Campbell’s “correspondence with [dossier author John] Scarlett was published, [and] it transpired that the language on the forty-five-minute claim had been strengthened at Campbell’s request, after he complained that it was ‘weak,’” and Campbell was compelled to resign before the Inquiry was even completed (Coughlin 344). Gilligan, as well as other members of the BBC hierarchy, would also lose his job over the revelations of the Hutton Inquiry. None of this information, though, is covered in either play.
There are, of course, many reasons for this fact. In the case of *Justifying War*, the findings of the Inquiry were released after the initial staging of the play, and the choice to only stage testimony precluded any possibility of staging any outside effects of the events within the courtroom. Likewise, the events within the chronology of *Stuff Happens*, aside from a few stray connections to American policy toward Palestine near the play’s conclusion, end with the invasion of Iraq, thereby placing the Hutton Inquiry outside of the domain of the play, though the Inquiry’s insights were available to Hare. Whether he believed such findings or sided with the numerous groups who questioned them is a whole other question. All of this, though, points to the fact that theatre’s New Journalism—like New Labour’s relationship to Old Conservatism—still has all of the same problems of the Old Journalism: the need to run important stories as soon as possible, even as new information is constantly uncovered, bias, and a choosing of historical facts to shape a specific narrative, as Hayden White might say, that leads to a particular view of the present. This is not to say that the New Journalism is without value, though. Certainly, works such as *Stuff Happens* and *Justifying War* stand as important counterdiscourses to the hegemonies of the state and mass media, particularly when that media is either state-owned or corporate. Interestingly, such a move would appear to parallel the conclusion to Janelle Reinelt’s study of British political theater *After Brecht*, where she writes,

Here, then, is the social challenge of history-at-this-moment: how to move forward into a new situation with renewed creativity and without giving up a sense of social justice and a vision of a better political order. Reenter *agency*, *identity*, and *teleology*—old-fashioned terms that may keep the Brechtian legacy alive and vital as the new historical formation takes shape. (209)
Certainly, Brecht’s counterdiscourses critiqued the assumptions of journalists and newspapers in his own time, but it seems dangerously facile to imply that theatre can ever wholly replace politics or media, if for no other reason than that might lower the standard of both politics and media, rather than encouraging both greater ethics from those in power and greater skepticism from those viewing the power, a perpetual meta-stance. Perhaps most importantly, the New Journalism’s greatest trait comes from its meta-journalism, its attempt to point out the failings of the dominant narrative, to alienate audiences from the failings of media, politicians, and theater. Few would doubt that Hare and Norton-Taylor selected and sequenced the material for their plays for a variety of artistic and political purposes, not for the sake of a pristine journalism alone. As such, their works point to the same selections made by journalists and politicians every day, whether for ratings, votes, or the aesthetics of a feature story. And the work of these cultural authors should be equally scrutinized—their fictions and sequencings equally questioned—as those of the New Journalism, where no one assumes the accuracy sometimes, and troublingly, afforded politicians and newspapers. Interestingly, though, within British drama, what Hare and Norton-Taylor helped to achieve was not a new mode of scrutiny for both British drama and journalism, but a counternarrative that would fuel much new fictional drama in Britain that explored different aspects of the “war on terror.”

An Alternative Monolith

Among the first of these critical encounters with journalists on stage was Colin Teevan’s play *How Many Miles to Basra*? Although the work did not reach stage until it was performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in September 2006, its original incarnation as a BBC Radio 3 production broadcast on 11 July 2004 left the markings of an adventure story for radio all over
the play’s narrative, even as the story is set beside a critique, presumably, of BBC Radio, as well as the broader BBC journalism hierarchy. The play, essentially, tells the story of a group of four British Army soldiers, accompanied by an Iraqi translator and a BBC reporter, who travel on an unauthorized mission through Iraq in order to deliver blood money to a warlord in an attempt to make amends for killing three Iraqis at a checkpoint. By the end, all of the British soldiers are killed—the last by American F18 Hornets—but the journalist, Ursula, armed with an endlessly working digital recorder, lives to tell their story, or her perception of it. The narrative of the play is framed, and broken once in the middle, with Ursula’s encounters within her office back in the United Kingdom, just after having returned from Iraq. And, as it turns out, Ursula’s return just happens to dovetail with the breaking of the September Dossier, as the office’s new secretary, Sophie, tells Ursula, when she enquires into where her boss, Tariq, is and doesn’t understand why he would need to meet with the lawyers about the “sexing up”:

A source in the Intelligence Service told Andrew Gilligan that the Government asked Intelligence to sex up the dossier on Saddam’s weapon capabilities. And the Government then published the dossier knowing it to contain false claims. And Andy went on air with it earlier in the week, and since then the place has gone mad. The Prime Minister’s office has been piling the pressure on the heads of departments, and so we’re having to go through everything with a fine-tooth comb. Even Tariq’s under pressure and he’d nothing to do with it. (Teevan 19)

While primarily serving as a plot device—this explanation provides the justification for Sophie’s cataloguing of Ursula’s recordings, the playing of which takes the play into flashback

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7 The fact that Ursula’s boss would happen to have an Arabic name seems a relatively arbitrary choice, though it does attempt to establish a measure of fear of anti-Arab prejudices within Tariq’s motivations, such as when he tells Ursula, “What I do know, Ursula, is we’ve got to be careful, and some of us more than others,” continuing on to joke, “From now on you must call me Derek” (Teevan 74).
mode—the specific frame sets the tale of events on the ground in Iraq against a backdrop of media manipulations and misinformation back home in London. After all, if the government would “sex up” the reasons for getting into the war, why would it tell the truth about how the war was prosecuted? In fact, though the first act ends with a car bomb, predictably leaving the audience to wonder who survived, the moment of excitement is preceded by one of the soldiers, Freddie, telling Ursula, “Because all you lot are interested in is the story. And to make your stories suit your agenda. And to make your stories suit your agenda, you have to have goodies and baddies. And the agenda dictates the army is always painted as the baddy. Yet we didn’t choose to be here” (69). However, when the second act begins, it returns to the office, to a debate on the role of the media, and to a discussion of Andrew Gilligan:

URTULA: Is Gilligan’s source not sound then?

TARIQ: Excuse me?

URTULA: The “sexing up” claim.

TARIQ: Not my source. Not my story, I’m glad to say.

URTULA: But now your problem?

TARIQ: You don’t give up!

URTULA: A good journalist…

TARIQ: I understand from my colleagues that their source is reliable.

URTULA: But do you think it is?

TARIQ: What I think is neither here nor there. I have no evidence that leads me to believe that my colleagues are anything other than committed to fairness, accuracy, and impartiality in all their reporting.

URTULA: But you do suspect there’s an agenda?
TARIQ: Nor is what I suspect either here or there.

URSULA: You’ve been with the lawyers too long.

Though such moments, the center of Teevan’s adventure tale of heroism and futility in the Iraq War returns to the controversy over how the war was justified, the fulcrum of the play resting on the same reports as the documentary work by David Hare and Richard Norton-Taylor. At the same time, what separates Teevan’s work, other than the fictional frame, is that his protagonist, Ursula, did not know the story back home, while she was out in the field chasing her own reports. Perhaps likemany other reporters in the real world, she found her story on the ground caught between institutional and governmental crosshairs that shaped themselves in a different context than her actual reporting. Furthermore, the centrality of the debate over WMDs to the reception of Ursula’s reporting also makes an argument that there can be no conception of the war in Iraq in Britain that does not rest in the shadow of the forty-five minutes claim, whether that shadow casts doubt over the government or restricts journalists’ ability to question that government. Either way, Gilligan’s sloppiness in uncovering the intelligence flaw left a double-edged sword hanging over everyone. And, for Ursula, the cuts were inescapable.

In the second-to-last scene in the play, worth quoting at length, Ursula and Tariq debate their responsibility in how to portray the lives and deaths of the soldiers that Ursula followed through Iraq, and the nature of how the truth is shaped during a time of war:

TARIQ: The MoD issued a statement saying how these four servicemen died, under friendly fire, escorting three Bedouin through the British zone in order to deliver blood money to save a Bedouin’s family.

URSULA: They shot three unarmed Bedouin dead.

TARIQ: The soldiers died heroes.
URSULA: They were heroes, but—

TARIQ: One when the car went over a mine—

URSULA: An unexploded American shell—

TARIQ: One presumed lost in a sandstorm—

URSULA: After attempting to rape a journalist.

TARIQ: And the remaining two at the rendezvous which had been inadvertently arranged at an archaeological site Saddam had been using as a weapons dump.

URSULA: Weapons dump? There were no weapons. It was a two-and-a-half-thousand-year old body dump. And the Allies have just dumped more bodies on it.

TARIQ: Their story is largely true.

URSULA: Apart from the bits that are blatant lies. Christ, isn’t it our job to report the truth?

TARIQ: But is the truth so simple—

URSULA: No, it’s complicated, but just because it is complex, does not mean we should avoid it.

TARIQ: Your version tarnishes the reputation of four military heroes.

URSULA: They were heroic, but in a much more human way. The public are not idiots. They understand moral complexity.

TARIQ: The discrepancies you wish to expose strip the men of the dignity the official version affords them. And the Government would be only too happy to seize upon your contradicting of the official version of event to sidetrack us and the public from the real issues—
URSULA: Which are?

TARIQ: Why we are there in the first place. That’s the greater truth. They lied to us.

Paralleling the fabricated narratives that the American Army promoted about Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman, the passage explores both the nature of memory, representation, and heroism during war, complicating the idea of what it means to support soldiers and honor their memories in the face of the horrors and moral complexities of war zones. Ursula, like Hare in his portrayal of Powell challenging, but inevitably promoting, the Bush Administration policies, sees the soldier’s struggle, rather than their idealization, as the true heroism, a story that at once promotes their bravery, while challenging the sensibility of the war they have been asked to serve in. Tariq, on the other hand, places the narrative complexity of the individual acts of soldiers below the greater cause of challenging the government’s justification for the war in the first place, the failure of the Labour government to resist the hyping of the war becoming the more important metanarrative. However, one must also question Tariq’s commitment to this idea of challenging the government, given that his news bureau, presumably, did not issue such challenges before the war, and his statement earlier that it is important to “be careful.” The question becomes one of whether Tariq truly believes in the importance of questioning the dissemination of information from government, or merely follows the popular narratives of the time, focusing attention on the controversies that sell, rather than breaking any stories himself. In this narrative, then, Ursula becomes the heroic image of the crusading journalist, risking her life in the battlefield, and then challenging the bureaucracy back home in order to challenge the truth. Or is she?
As noted previously, one of the soldiers, Freddie, questioned whether Ursula truly cared about the truth of the soldiers’ experience, or was merely interested in pursuing a pre-conceived narrative. This assessment is a milder parallel to what Ursula herself says when Tariq begins talking about how strongly he believes in freedom of the press: “And you said three dead Brits and I could have top slot. I’ve got four” (104). A line like this becomes one where delivery makes all the difference: does it get played as a desperate last resort to Tariq’s need for a sensational story, or is it indicative of Ursula’s sensibility. Either way, it represents a desire to present her story at all costs, which once again puts the ethics of her profession on the table, as it seems fair to question where her crusading spirit was before the war. It, also, places her in the same position as Andrew Gilligan: breaking a story that ended up costing the lives of all of its sources, which also seems like a less than idyllic model of journalism.

Oddly enough, the play does not, however, end in the newsroom, or even on the battlefield, but, instead, in the living room of the squad leader’s wife, Jeannie, in order to return some of Sergeant Stewart McDonald’s belongings, as well as to give a copy of a recording of Stewart to Jeannie. In the scene, Ursula tells Jeannie, “I came here because—because perhaps you haven’t been told all the details surrounding the death of your husband. I went to Geordie’s mother. I had a tape of him reading a letter he had written to her. The letter was never passed on to her. I think because in it he admitted killing a Bedouin at a checkpoint. I felt she should know the truth, but also that she should hear him tell her he loved her which he hadn’t done since he left home” (110). Jeannie, plainly replies, “You have a great commitment to the truth,” stating shortly thereafter, “Please, I have to pick my children up. I must get ready” (111). Though Jeannie does show gratitude when Ursula provides her with one of the recordings of Stewart, it becomes clear as the play draws to an end that Ursula’s search for the truth perhaps
has more to do with her own needs than the lives of those she effects or any commitment to journalistic ethics. In the final measure, the most noble actions lay dead in Iraq, not alive in any Western newsrooms.

And this has been the new metanarrative for British theater moving forward. Not only are government officials held culpable for misrepresentations of intelligence, Muslims, or the Middle East, but so are most journalists shown on stage with them. In David Hare’s other play touching on Iraq, *The Vertical Hour*, when an American former journalist explains that she gave advice to President Bush on Iraq because of respect for the Office of the President, as well as support for the war, her boyfriend’s British father replies, “No doubt you feel that if your president calls, you have to answer that call. If my prime minister called, I’d let it ring. That’s the difference” (31). Whether or not this is actually how British journalists behaved before the war is another question, but it does setup the moment, later in the play, when the father lectures the journalist, ticking off what he assumes she didn’t tell the president, such as “Drop bombs where you like” and “Manufacture intelligence from the most corrupt and dishonest elements in the country. Sanction torture,” before finally concluding, “You didn’t say, ‘It doesn’t matter if tens of thousands of people get killed, just so long as they’re not Americans’” (85). More recently, Steven Lally’s 2009 production *Oh Well Never Mind* portrayed journalists pulled between sensationalism, ignorance, and a bullying progressivism as they debate representations of the July 2005 subway bombings in London and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the central debate involving the media misrepresentations—fueled by the British Police—of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes. In the play, only one journalist wants to check to make

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8 Menezes, a Brazilian national, was shot in a London subway station on July 22, 2005, the day after a failed attempt at another subway bombing. In the aftermath, there were many reports about suspicious behaviors and clothing, though the 2008 inquest would later reveal that police had not even shouted a warning before firing on Menezes.
sure the information received from police reports is accurate before running it, while her colleagues push on ahead with the misinformation.

In this way, what began as an attempt to create a New Journalism on stage, has, particularly with the cross to fictional dramas, developed into a condemnation of all journalism. In all of the plays, there are very few good individuals. Perhaps, to paraphrase Ursula, the writers believe that the audiences are capable of understanding moral complexity. However, there also seems to have been a juxtaposition of metanarratives, from the threat that Iraq posed to a distrust of any journalistic and governmental information. While this skepticism is, likely, a less dangerous framework than attempts at manufacturing war, it begs the question of whether the plays are attempting to raise an alternative set of questions and explore truth, or are merely providing an alternative monolithic dissemination of information. After all, the idea that no journalists or government officials can be trusted—or that this should be represented through strikingly similar sequences of events in multiple works—also presents a homogenous and filtered narrative in pursuit of a static political agenda. The question remains as to what lies on the other side of this mass skepticism, in a world where some measure of facts are still needed in order to construct ideology, policy and art. True, in the face of New Labour’s failure, perhaps any alternative narrative was needed. However, theatrical questionings of fact are no substitute for a reliable press, and the questions laid out on the British stage, as the recent News of the World scandal indicate, still remain present and pressing. Perhaps, in the end, alternative narratives and skepticism on stage are much easier to construct than journalistic or political integrity.
Chapter 4

Home Before History: American Domestic Drama in a Post-9/11 World

Debates over family structures have become commonplace in contemporary American culture: from Dan Quayle questioning Murphy Brown’s fitness as a mother, to the myths about the Columbine killers, to arguments over gay marriage and “traditional” marriage, much of public discourse has been shaped around the notion of doing what’s “best” for families. As Stephanie Coontz writes in *The Way We Never Were*, her study of family myths in American culture,

Such visions of past family life exert a powerful emotional pull on most Americans, and with good reason, given the fragility of many modern commitments. The problem is not only that these visions bear a suspicious resemblance to reruns of old television shows, but also that the scripts of different shows have been mixed up: June Cleaver suddenly has a Grandpa Walton dispensing advice in her kitchen. (8-9)

Not surprisingly, American theater has been just as fascinated with representations of family—and debates over how they’re constituted, how they function, and what is “best” for them—as the larger American culture. In fact, of the ten Pulitzer Prizes for Drama that have been awarded since the 2000 edition of Coontz’s book, six have gone to plays dealing specifically with families—*Dinner with Friends* (2000), *Proof* (2001), *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), *Anna in the Tropics* (2003), *Rabbit Hole* (2007), *August: Osage Country* (2008), and *Next to Normal* (2010)—while two others—*Doubt* (2005) and *Ruined* (2009)—are structured
like family dramas and have characters related to one another.\textsuperscript{1} The one outlier appears to be \textit{I Am My Own Wife} (2004), though even it has a reference to family relations in the title, which is to say that all of the works have some measure of domestic concern.

And it was into this domestic context that American dramatic responses to the “war on terror” first and most consistently fell, as can be seen in plays such as Neil LaBute’s \textit{The Mercy Seat} and Christopher Shinn’s \textit{The Dying City}. In turning inward and homeward, these works fall squarely within a long-standing tradition of American theater, while also working to pull their audiences outside of the historical, economic, and political contexts. While part of this interest is the structural difference between plays and sociological/historical studies like the one Coontz wrote, the continued focus on home over society in American theatric responses to the war on terror has become the hallmark of a national artistic response to the politics of the day, and raises concerns over which bodies are “grievable,” as Judith Butler writes, when considering whom is on stage. On the other hand, in a more compelling work of domestic drama, Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros’ \textit{Omnium Gatherum}, the domestic form is carried outside of the realist tradition and used to actively resist the obscuring of violence in the post-9/11 era.\textsuperscript{2}

\textbf{American Domestic Drama}

This emphasis on families in post-9/11 theater falls within a long tradition. In the twentieth century, American theater was often defined by domesticity, from earlier works such as \textit{Trifles} (1916) and \textit{Why Marry?} (1918), to canonic standards and Pulitzer Prize winners, such

\textsuperscript{1} No Prize was awarded in 2006.
\textsuperscript{2} For reasons that should be clear shortly, in discussing responses to September 11th, domestic drama becomes a better grouping than family drama. While most of the plays have characters related to one another, there are usually friends in the home in addition to family, and, in the case of \textit{The Mercy Seat}, the characters are unrelated, but the central issue is, essentially, domestic. Additionally, the one caveat to the argument presented here are plays that deal with the specific issue of soldiers coming home, which will be discussed in depth, and multinationally, in a later chapter.
as *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1957), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *Fences* (1987). While a good argument can be made that many of these works are about larger issues, such as gender, race, and sexuality, it is remarkable that the explorations are always constructed through their effect on the family. In fact, as early as 1978, Tom Scanlan would write that “the family situation is the crucial subject of American drama” (3), noting that “[h]owever we draw the list, American drama is dominated by plays of family life” (5). Thaddeus Wakefield similarly states, “The central subject of American Drama is, arguably, the American family. From Royall Tyler’s colonial comedy *The Contrast* (1787) to August Wilson’s *King Hedley II* (2000), relationships between husbands, wives, and their children have consistently been used by American playwrights to explore and illuminate the American experience” (1). Historically, the family drama has been the essential form of American theater, both in terms of achieving canonical status and in terms of popular appeal.³ However, the question remains as to whether domestic dramas have any degree of political efficacy.

Part of this problem derives from the fact that the basic terms by which we debate both the depictions and politics of family stand outside of history. As Coontz writes regarding many of the myths as to the so-called decline of the family, “[D]rug abuse was more widespread at the end of the 1890s than at the end of the 1990s, and the rate of alcohol consumption was almost three times higher in the early nineteenth century than it is currently. Prostitution and serious sexually transmitted diseases were also more prevalent in America one hundred years ago than they are today” (xi). Similarly, she notes of race myths, “How many Americans know, for example, that a larger proportion of black parents than white parents help their children with

³ David Auburn’s *Proof*, after all, received more professional productions than any other show over the past decade, and many other domestic dramas were high on the list. In fact, *The Glass Menagerie* tied for tenth, though the numbers do exclude both Shakespeare and holiday shows, such as *A Christmas Carol*—though that too has a significant family component (Teachout).
homework three or more times a week? Or that out-of-wedlock birth rates for black women have been falling steadily and are now lower than at any time since 1969, while the birth rate of African American teens is the lowest since 1960” (xxvi). While these numbers, as Coontz describes, are probably not known to most Americans, dealing with identity based politics is probably where American family drama has most consistently succeeded. After all, a work like August Wilson’s *Fences* presents a different image of the 1950s in America than the syndicated television shows from the period. As Marc Maufort writes in his introduction to the collection *Staging Difference*,

The phenomenon of cultural pluralism in American theatre and drama is threefold. It manifests itself in performance; it has origins in the canon of American drama and flourishes in the new (mostly contemporary) multicultural drama. These aspects in turn consistently reflect four major concerns: the process of re-vision of the Melting Pot; the ambivalence towards assimilations; the conflation of gender/class/race conflicts; and, four, the challenge to traditional realism. (3).

As American culture became more fragmented and concerned with identity, so did American theater, in works such as Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* (1979), David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* (1997). Broadway even staged an African American production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2008), a play already known for delving into issues of sexuality.

For Coontz, these debates over how families are constituted and whether cultural myths and representations match the reality presents only the surface level of a deeper issue of increased economic stratification and its effects on the family:
Despite the economic recovery of the past seven years [during the Clinton Administration], the Luxembourg Income Study shows that the United States has a lower proportion of middle-income households, and a higher proportion of both wealthy and poor or near-poor ones, than any other industrialized country except Russia. As of 1999, the top 1 percent of all Americans (2.7 million people) had as much after-tax income as the bottom 100 million Americans, an inequality ratio twice as large as in 1977. (xxvii)

In other words, for Coontz, the debates over identity, sexuality, and morals missed a fundamental truth: the most drastic change in American life in recent years has been a change in economic relationships. Furthermore, the conservative emphasis on “family values,” has obscured the change in economic relations. This creates a circumstance in which morality is only determined based on one’s sexual behavior and the ability to procreate within a normative family structure, and not how one relates to others through other political and economic means (xix). Instead of using the maintenance of family stability as a means by which to create superstructures that denigrate social relations, the focus on who is in a family, as opposed to how they are sustained economically or limited politically, creates a sexual politics sideshow, while conservative economic policy continues to restructure all lives. The family simply removes the broader social context from public discourse, making political and economic relationships—arguably those with a broader effect—less important than the comparatively smaller family space. Of course, a progressive family drama tradition would point out this effect. Certainly, for Thaddeus Wakefield, family drama provides an object by which to analyze economic relationships. Therefore, the base of his analysis is one where “[i]n twentieth century American society, family members do not value each other through intrinsic standards but rather are objectified and
commodified by economic standards,” and this is a relationship he sees pervasively playing itself out in works such as *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Death of a Salesman* (2).

Given this history of domestic drama in American theater, it should come as no surprise that many of the first theatric responses to September 11th came in the form of domestic theater. Even a play about real-life stories of firefighters, *The Guys*, was set entirely in the home of a journalist helping a fire chief to write stories about the men in his ladder who had died on September 11th.4 And *The Guys* does not stand alone in its domestic setting. The early responses of both Neil Labute and Christopher Shinn, as well as Shinn’s later work in *Dying City*, helped set a tone in which the psychological and personal effects of September 11th, and the later wars that would define the war on terror, would stand as a more central concern than the systemic issues that caused either the initial attack on Manhattan, or the spreading violence in Central Asia and the Middle East.

**9/11 as Gender War**

*The Mercy Seat* (2002) was produced, arguably, at the height of Neil LaBute’s career. Coming after a string of critical successes on stage and screen (*In the Company of Men* (1992 stage/1997 film), *Possession* (2002 film), and *The Shape of Things* (2001 stage/2003 film), the play also was staged in New York City in the first complete season after September 11th, placing it at an interesting historical juncture. Interestingly, both of these temporal locations had a significant impact on the shape of LaBute’s response to September 11th. In terms of content, the

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4 While not within the frame of this discussion, it remains interesting to note that writer Anne Nelson, who had never written a play before, turned toward the living room as the natural set for the first play she would pen. Granted, part of this may be the true-to-life nature of a story based on her actual experiences in helping a fire chief to write eulogies. However, the fact that they would write these in a living room only underscores the emphasis on domesticity in American social/political life, if for no other reason than because it seems such a natural place to do the work.
play is set in New York “not long ago,” a time that quickly becomes clear as a distinction for “September 12th,” with obvious markers like the discussion of people hanging photocopies of missing persons (4/14). In terms of form, the play also shows basic similarities to LaBute’s major works, particularly those preceding The Mercy Seat, in that it depicts a gendered conflict, in this case between one man and one woman, and a plot twist coming late in the play.\(^5\)

Similarly, the play tells the story of a man, Ben, trying to decide if he wants to use September 11\(^{th}\) as a cover to leave his wife and run off with his mistress, Abby. The inevitable twist occurs when, at Abby’s urging, he finally makes the phone call he had intended to make on September 11\(^{th}\): ending his relationship with Abby, not his wife. In some ways, the work appears as the only response to September 11\(^{th}\) that Neil LaBute could write, which begs the question of which was more important to LaBute: responding to the events of that day—and what would follow after—or merely fitting September 11\(^{th}\) into his personal style.

In her initial response to the war on terror Precarious Life, Judith Butler writes, “[B]oth our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global process of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value” (xii). As noted in the introduction, for Butler, September 11\(^{th}\) represented a rupture by which easy assumptions of “First World” complacencies, power, and political bias were challenged, ostensibly creating an opportunity for Americans to reconceive and restructure political and economic relations in a more progressive and inclusive manner. Initially, The Mercy Seat would appear to exist right at the center of this rupture. The play begins with Ben

\(^5\) For example, the two bookends of his early work, In the Company of Men and The Shape of Things, both depict gendered struggles, the first with men attempting to destroy a woman for revenge, and the second with a woman turning a man into her art project, a detail only revealed at the end of the play, in what is meant to be a surprising twist. Later works, such as This Is How It Goes would also place a similar tension over other issues, such as race.
sitting in a “loveseat, staring straight ahead. A cell phone rests in one hand. It rings and rings” (5). Similarly, when Abby enters, she is “covered in dust and carrying several plastic bags [groceries]” and “White clouds of dust follow her every move” (5). Thus, the play opens with the psychological and physical scars of September 11th on display, leading the audience to believe that an exploration of the trauma of that day is in store, except that this exploration involves September 11th not as social/historical/political event, but as an opportunity for personal gain. Just as America restated its hegemonic power after the September 11th attacks, LaBute’s characters use the attacks not as an opportunity for meaningful change and evaluation, but to pursue the same goals they carried before the attacks. In fact, while the before-mentioned characters hanging Xeroxes exist somewhere in the outside world, in the dramatic space of the play, the characters find themselves unconcerned with who may or may not still be living, but, instead, Abby tells Ben, “That’s what you told me. / You said, ‘I’m going to call her. I am. Right now.’ You were sitting on that couch, the same spot, really, and I was kneeling between your legs when you told me that. Five minutes before it happened. Like, a minute before all this…happened. (Beat.) Of course, we’ve heard about that one a few times now, haven’t we? The BIG CALL” (8). Slowly, the audience learns that the traumatized state in which Ben begins the play grows not out of the devastation of the attacks on the World Trade Center, but out of a paralyzed inability to understand how best to use the attacks to his advantage. As he tells Abby, who keeps asking him about his reaction to what has happened, “I mean…shit, it’s obvious that it’s a catastrophe, right? That’s…Why even mention that? It’s beyond. I can’t really find words that’re even,” continuing a few lines later, “It ‘moves’ me, of course it does! But we’ve gotta look at the implications here. What it means to us, our future. I don’t wanna sound crass here or unfeeling or…” (13). For Ben, September 11th, at the end of the day, after the initial shock, is a
“meal ticket,” an opportunity to run off with his mistress without having to tell his wife and children that he would prefer another life: rather than a national moment that breeds responsibility, it becomes the absolute call to leave all his responsibilities behind (15). As he plainly tells Abby, “And so then, yesterday, through all the smoke and fear and just, I dunno, *apocalyptic* shit ... I see a way for us to go for it, to totally erase the past—and I don’t think it makes me Lucifer or a criminal or some bad man because I noticed it ... More than anything else, that’s what this is. A chance I know it is” (32).

Juxtaposed against Ben’s sense of opportunity is Abby’s continual reference to the horror of the world outside and the need to continue on. In fact, shortly after entering the home, she tells a long story about the Xeroxes, an iconic image for many New Yorkers:6

> On my way back down here, from the store, I followed someone. I mean, I saw this woman wandering along, putting up Xeroxes of this guy. A young man. Probably not her husband, looked too young for her, but then hey … (Points to herself and Ben.) I don’t think so, though. But she’s just shuffling along in the dark with sunglasses on and this stack of pages, some masking tape, doing it at random. Light poles, the sides of buildings, even on a car or two. Seriously. Didn’t put the thing under the wiper but taped it right to the window. A picture of this smiling young man. In a tuxedo. ‘Have You Seen Him?’ and a phone number. (Beat.) I must’ve trailed her for, like, ten blocks or so before I realized I’d missed the street.

For Abby, there is an actual horror to the events of September 11th that exists outside of its effect on her affair, because she has chosen to venture outside of the apartment and personally see the

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6 Inside the World Trade Center Tribute Center at Ground Zero there are a number of the fliers that covered many parts of New York City after the attacks on display.
effects of the attacks, rather than merely contemplate using them as an excuse to escape from her obligations. Similarly, not long after Ben discusses September 11th as a “chance,” Abby tells him, “So…there’s probably a lot of spouses out there right now who wish their dearly departed would’ve stopped to pick up a nice Frappuccino or dropped off that roll of film they were carrying around in their pocket…hell, maybe paid for a blow job, even. Whatever it takes to stay alive. (Beat.) I’m saying you really dodged a bullet there” (33).7 Returning to Precarious Lives, it is interesting to note Butler’s distinction between those whom one is and is not allowed to grieve for: “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Butler xiv-xv). For Abby, the woman in the street—and the dead man—become grievable lives because she encountered them interpersonally, while the only grievable life for Ben is his own because his only meaningful decision is whether or not to answer his phone. Initially, this makes Ben infinitely interesting: he is a character that exists outside of history at a moment of absolute historical import; he is the face of the uncaring American, who looks away from the socio-political in order to do what is best for himself, who, surely, months later, would hardly raise an eyebrow as his country marched from one war to another. Ben, then, represents a certain kind of reaction to September 11th that deserves its own examination; the problem is that the actual event—the true faces related to the violence—remain perpetually offstage, and, generally, though Abby does point in their direction, apart from the conversation. They become the audience’s excuse for not asking the hard questions presented by the underlying historical events,

7 Within the play, Ben is alive because he was late going to the World Trade Center for work in order to receive one last act of oral sex from Abby before ending their relationship. As indicated, this is the kind of plot twist one comes to expect from Neil Labute.
for grieving for themselves in exclusion of others. In fact, Abby’s longest monologue is not the story of the woman with her photocopies, but, instead, a long fantasy relating herself to Ben’s wife: “But most of the time I just imagine [when having sex with Ben] that it’s your wife. Lately, that’s the thought that I can’t seem to get out of my head. That it’s your sweet little Mrs. from the suburbs behind me with one of those, umm, things—those, like, strappy things that you buy at sex shops—and she’s just going to town on me. Banging away for hours because of what I’ve done to her life” (45). Interestingly, as the play moves forward, Abby is propelled farther and farther from the woman with the photocopies, not only temporally and spatially, but also in terms of the content of her words, until she finally is as focused on the relatively minor issues of her own apartment as Ben is. Ideologically, he may be the more morally questionable character, but he is also the one to win the war of thematic focus. In the end, when Abby finally does force Ben to make a decisive action, it is not to go out into the world, but to make the phone call he had intended to make the day before, the one she believes will be to leave his wife. In reality, this turns out to be a phone call to Abby to tell her that he cannot ever bring himself to leave his family. And it is this, not everything that Abby had seen while going for groceries, that finally compels her to leave the apartment. This departure leaves Ben alone, holding his cell phone, listening to the ringing, much as Vladimir and Estragon, in the very same position he began the play.

Of course, Vladimir and Estragon were designed to stand outside of any specific social/historical/political moment. The fact that LaBute attempts to do the same with his characters in the aftermath of September 11th creates a more challenging political problem, if a less daunting aesthetic one. Though Abby criticizes Ben’s inaction, the play itself does not stand as a criticism of such, but, instead, constantly encourages audiences to narrow the frame in which
they engage the events of the world. It uses the events of September 11th not as a means by
which to explore the causes and ramifications of the attacks, but, instead, as a backdrop for the
same kind of play that Neil LaBute has been writing throughout his career, complete with
gendered conflict and a plot twist. The story would not have been any different had Ben missed
a ride on the Tube on July 7, 2007 or a flight to New Orleans just before Hurricane Katrina. It is
a narrative that stands outside of the historical moment, while using the historical moment as “a
magic ticket” in the same way as its male lead. It is no wonder that all physical suffering, save a
touch of dust, is left offstage, a Greek tragedy in which real world violence is made mythic. The
deaths of those in the streets below are left as the ungrievable, while the living adulterer’s pain is
put on display.

For some critics, this emphasis on staging the inhumane in characters—and making
audiences question the violences and cruelties they are willing to commit—is precisely what
makes LaBute an important and political writer and director. Christopher Bigsby, for one,
argues, “He is political in the sense that he looks in private lives for those radical imperfections
equally observable in public life” (101). Building on this argument, Ilka Saal states, “Let us not
forget that while LaBute’s characters remain indifferent to the victims of their casual cruelties,
the author does not. In restaging the nation’s cultural memory, he resurrects these ‘Others,’ so
that they might henceforth haunt the nation’s memory and refuse to be written out of history”
(333). Tellingly, Saal’s discussion, while including a number of LaBute’s works, does not
discuss The Mercy Seat, a play that takes a historical event and places it outside of history, rather
than moving characters outside of the public consciousness within history. The basic argument
that Saal makes—that attention to the cruelties critiques power structures—becomes more
difficult to make when the domestic cruelties are set against a much larger act of violence, and
the violences that would soon unfold from it. Additionally, while the victims of earlier LaBute misanthropes are placed onstage in plays such as *In the Company of Men* and *The Shape of Things*, both Ben’s family and other victims of the attack are removed from the scene in *The Mercy Seat*, thereby obscuring the insight for which Saal argues. Furthermore, what is perhaps most disturbing about this tendency to move away from an expansive understanding of the context in which the events that unfolded on September 11th and in the war on terror to a more narrow, and rather narcissistic, examination of their effects in the most limited of spaces is how common such an approach has been in American theater.

9/11 as Interpersonal Tragedy

No one has mastered such diversionary techniques better than Christopher Shinn. Though originally staged in London in the spring of 2002—another early entry in the responses to September 11th on stage—*Where Do We Live* would not have its New York premiere until May 2004, significantly after the premiere of *The Mercy Seat*. Despite the London premiere and the delayed transportation to American stages, *Where Do We Live* is a quintessentially American play: written by a New Yorker, set in Manhattan, and involving the internal and interpersonal struggles of its characters in a pair of apartments. Ostensibly written as a sequel to Shinn’s earlier play *Other People* (2000), *Where Do I Live* resembles the earlier work more in the narrative of people searching for how to put their lives and relationships together, rather than in the actual characters, only one of whom remains from the earlier play. However, it is at the very end of this two-play arc that Shinn places the events of September 11th, a convenient *deus ex machina* for restoring some measure of order and meaning to the flitting lives of the characters.
Though the play opens at a bar in August 2001, the vast majority of the story takes place in a pair of apartments within the same building. In one apartment, Stephen, a writer, struggles with how to handle his relationship with the ill-matched Tyler, who lives off a trust fund and goes to acting classes. In the second apartment, Shedrick deals drugs and sleeps with a British woman, Lily. Between the two apartments lies a gulf of various racial, political, and social divides, with the only true bridge coming when Timothy, Shedrick’s uncle, knocks on Stephen’s door, to ask for a cigarette or a small amount of money. In this world, the characters discuss their relationships, their values, their arts, their drugs, and their sex, moving through a relatively narrow frame of parties and relationships. Stephen and Tyler argue over welfare politics, separate, and the last scene of that August ends with Stephen screaming to Timothy, on the other side of a closed door, that he quit smoking (203). He is alone, and somewhere in that void, the attacks happen.

On stage, the time moves to September 27, 2001, on the other side of the attacks with Timothy and Lily looking through pictures of Timothy and his wife, who died long before. The only sign of a change in the world surrounding the characters occurs when Lily tells Shed, “You didn’t miss much. Dave’s back with Maryanne. He stays in his room, doesn’t leave the apartment, he bought all these gas masks and night-vision goggles. Tell me about your job, it sounds brilliant” (206). As in The Mercy Seat, the events become a backdrop for the interpersonal relationship between the two characters, a side-story to seemingly raise the stakes without engaging any of the itinerant issues present with the event that occurred. In fact, the closest the play comes to exploring the political context of 9/11 is when Leo, a man that Stephen picked up at a bar, engages in conspiracy theories about the attacks:
I’m serious, it makes perfect sense. This was Giuliani’s greatest fantasy and his greatest fear. He’s always had a fascist impulse, which this fits perfectly. But, remember last summer, he had prostate cancer, and there was all that media coverage about how he might be impotent. Months later the two tallest most phallic buildings in New York City go down. What was happening in his body, happening in his city...What’s funniest is he’s just like the Taliban—obsessed with forcing his rules, his ideology, violently upon the people. (210-1)

On the surface, this would seem an attempt to challenge the Rudy Giuliani myth created by the national media in the days after the September 11th attacks, a myth that gay New Yorkers certainly would have been in an appropriate position to reexamine. However, the political statement comes from a character picked up in a bar carrying cocaine answering Stephen—who asks what they are going to do and who is much more interested in sexual fulfillment than political discourse—“Have sex” (210). And even for Leo, an exploration of the conspiracy of love makes for just as good a form of foreplay as politics: “The idea of love is so heteronormative, and it’s perfect for capitalism: it prevents people from thinking about real problems in their lives, it makes them think, when they feel bad, that something is wrong with them and not the world, it makes people form families and buy things for those families” (211-2). Ironically, in the end, Leo observes a similar relationship between family and economics as Coontz does in her work; however, within the play, Leo serves as his own distraction from the global issues surrounding the characters, as they readily move to having sex while the fighter jets continue their patrols outside. Afterward, Stephen attempts to rejoin the political conversation, stating, “[t]hat was interesting, the comparisons you were making before with the Taliban and Giuliani” (215). Leo, having been sexually fulfilled, responds with one word answers and
shortly leaves Stephen alone again, to question his relationship, perhaps the world, but not to engage the audience in any of the issues raised.

Instead, Shinn uses the attacks of September 11th as a motivator to finally have Stephen and his neighbors engage each other more intimately:

Stephen: Hey, what’s up.

*Shed holds out the carton.*

Shed: Hey—just—got these for you, you know…

Stephen: Oh.—Thank you…

*He takes the cigarettes. Pause.*

You guys—you guys okay?

Shed: Yeah, we fine.

Stephen: Your—dad’s okay?

Shed: My dad. Oh. That’s not my dad. That’s my uncle. But yeah, he’s okay.

Stephen: Oh—good.

Shed: He got his leg finally. They finally gave him his leg, so.

Stephen: That’s great.

Shed: That’s my uncle. He lived there, I lived there with him and my aunt, but she died in the car accident, where he lost his leg. So it’s good he got his leg, so.

Stephen: Oh—oh God.

*Pause.*

You see it happen?

Stephen: I—I saw it from my bedroom window. I saw the whole thing.

Shed: Yeah. I went up on the roof—saw that…
Stephen: Terrible.
Shed: Yeah.

*Pause.*

Anyway. That’s it.

Stephen: Thank you.

Shed: You welcome. (219-20).

Similarly, the play ends back in the bar, with a patron declaring a toast, “To the USA,” and Stephen and Patricia rejoining, “To where we live” and “Cheers,” respectively (222). In and of themselves, these are not unnatural scenes to write. As Anne Nelson notes in her introduction to *The Guys*, in the days after 9/11, it was not uncommon for New Yorkers to ask about one another’s “people” (v). Within the context of the play, however, September 11th functions not as an event within a historical context, from which other historical events will unfold, but as a *deus ex machina* that allows Shinn to manipulate shallow characters into a happy resolve. It asks the audience to turn away from context, to focus on the most narrowly defined spaces, without ever examining the systems that create them. It is the exact opposite of the definition of responsibility that Butler provides: “Our collective responsibility not merely as a nation, but as part of an international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation, requires that we ask how these conditions came about, and endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds” (Butler 18). In Butler’s formation, the collective becomes responsible for understanding the conditions that create violence and for formatting an alternative to the roots of such violence, the former understanding being a prerequisite for creating the latter alternative. To turn away from such responsibility is to condemn one’s own society to the perpetuation of violence. Ironically, the avoidant communion
of Shinn’s characters helps to perpetuate an ahistorical blindness in his audience that pulls them away from their own possibilities of alternative communions and communities.

Iraq as Interpersonal Trauma

The avoidance of this “root of violence” would come even more starkly in Shinn’s *Dying City*, a play that uses the violence of the Iraq War, much like LaBute uses September 11th, as an excuse to talk about a failed relationship, not as either the cause of violence, or a source of conflict in its own right.

The premise for the play is that an actor, Peter, visits his sister-in-law, Kelly, whom he hasn’t seen since his brother Craig’s funeral, after Craig was killed in Iraq. Peter, after walking off stage of a production of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*—the quintessential American domestic drama—because another actor insulted him, then arrives at Kelly’s doorstep, to discuss life and his dead brother. Interestingly, at the play’s opening, there is a moment where it appears that the play is going to wrestle with the political contexts of the latter:

Peter: Okay. I thought you meant—knew what to say, like, weren’t sure what to say because it seemed like maybe what happened wasn’t what the military was saying.

Kelly: Well. The way it was told to us—so many of his men saw it happen…

Peter: Yeah—I guess I thought maybe, because everyone there knew that Dad taught us, from the time we were little, how to shoot, how to handle weapons, that maybe some people didn’t believe the story.

Kelly: Right. Well, the investigation was still going on at that point, it wasn’t official, so some people might have felt that.
Peter: Yeah. And maybe it’s a gun culture thing, we grew up around guns, you didn’t, so it’s something I would feel more than you…Target practice, I just…Craig would always write about how careful he was with his weapon—I still can’t picture it..

Kelly: It’s a hard thing to picture.

At the play’s start, the shadow of Pat Tillman hangs over the story, as well as the possibility of a play that explores the American government’s manipulation of the Iraq War narrative, and how the families of individual soldiers struggle with attempting to reconcile the difference between their lived experiences and the narrative that the government, which sacrifices their loved ones, tries to sell them. This would have made for a fascinating, ideally contextualized play, but Peter’s following line quickly undermines this possibility: “Another thing that sucked was I could only be there for one day, remember? I had to fly back and do those stupid reshoots on my movie. The whole thing was so, it’s like this blur—dealing with Mom, two years after Dad—and, like, the whole gay thing, do these people know, or not, and no one talking to me—except you” (228). Within the opening moments, then, the scope of the play gives the illusion of expansion, to, instead, only narrow drastically. Part of this, of course, is the nature of Peter’s narcissism and need for connection, but that doesn’t particularly justify the necessity of putting Iraq on the table, only to run away from the issues raised by a highly questionable war.

A similar pattern emerges later in the play, in a flashback scene in which Craig and Kelly discuss the politics of the invasion of Iraq:

Craig: —We have never really talked about the war in the terms we did tonight.

Kelly: —Yes we have.
Craig: —I recall your saying to me that it would be good for Saddam to be out of power—when the war started. You disagreed with how we got into it, but you felt the Iraqis / would benefit—

Kelly: —What?

Craig: When we watched Tony Blair with Bush, remember? You said how articulate he was—

Kelly: Craig, I said it was a fake war that they were lying about to get us into—

Craig: You don’t remember when we watched Blair?

Kelly: I was—theoretically, we were talking about human rights in general—

Craig: And I remember you more or less agreeing with me.

Kelly: I was sympathetic—in the abstract—to the “idea” of human rights. I mean, what, did you expect me to argue for Saddam Hussein? Oh, this is ridiculous, you’re purposefully / misremembering! (255).

At this point, there is a pause, a lingering issue hanging in the air, before Kelly continues, “Now I’m wondering what else I’ve said to you that you’re unclear on, causing Craig to ask, “What does that mean?” Kelly finally answers, “I’m wondering about our having a baby” (255). As was the case with 9/11 in Where We Live, the invasion of Iraq becomes a plot device. Rather than an issue of international importance, with specific historical and political causes and ramifications, it merely uses the Iraq debate as a way to cause the couple to debate the probability of their having a child together, a moment that could have been reached by any number of other events that also stand outside of history. True, an argument could be made that the familial struggle was Shinn’s means by which to stage a discussion of the Iraq War on mainstream stages that were adverse to such loaded material. The play’s aversion to sustained
discussion of the war, however, leaves the impression that the war is the smoke and mirrors and the relationship trauma is of much more vital concern than the trauma of war.

The peak of these dichotomies also comes at the peak of the play, where Peter and Kelly read through Craig’s e-mails together. Once again, there is a turn toward the horror of Iraq, with Craig writing,

Abu Ghraib is already a punch line; I’ll spare you the jokes. For about five minutes we all felt the truth of it but that feeling got swept away in the hot desert wind like every other emotion here…From what I can tell, it’s not a big deal at home either. I think Abu Ghraib would only hurt Bush if it were pictures of Americans jerking off and smeared with shit; as long as it’s Iraqis it can only help. There’s a real comfort in the images—that we’re the powerful ones, in control, alive, clothed. (264) \(^8\)

Ironically, the concern that Craig represents is the exact concern presented in Butler’s own writing about Iraq, where she notes,

If we assume that everyone who is human goes to war like us, and that this is part of what makes them recognizably human, or that the violence we commit is violence that falls within the realm of recognizably human, but the violence that others commit is unrecognizable as human activity, then we make use of a limited and limiting cultural frame to understand what it is to be human. (Butler 89)

In the above moment, the play seems to be on the verge of examining which lives are and are not deemed as human for soldiers in Iraq and the Americans who support them at home. For Shinn,

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\(^8\) As noted in the second chapter, Jasbir K. Puar has extensively explored the fascination with specifically sexualized forms of violence and torture discussed here. What Shinn notes, though, is that the dominant/dominated binary is as important as the sexual/non-sexual nature of the acts, particularly to those already sympathetic to the invasion of Iraq and, presumably, to those who wanted to see American dominance reasserted in multiple ways after September 11th.
though, this analysis isn’t the end point, but, once again, the setup for showing the problem in Craig and Kelly’s relationship, when she reads the continuation of the e-mail:

In quieter moments I find myself thrown back into memories of who I was before and am faced with the realization that the horror I feel here is not just a consequence of the war, but is horror of the core of me, of who I have always been. In fact I have felt more clear-headed here than ever before. I haven’t felt the overwhelming need to sexually demean women that has haunted me my entire life, and haven’t fucked since leaving Fort Benning. (267)

As the carrier of the e-mails, Peter, in his narcissistic need to be in Kelly’s life in any context, becomes the carrier of the specific news that not only did Craig cheat on Kelly, but that, in opposition to Pat Tillman, he quite possibly “went to Iraq and shot himself” (269). Just as Peter carries the e-mails, Iraq carries the escape for Craig, the final way to abandon a domestic situation...an escape that could have been completed with a gun anywhere on the planet and in any historical or political context. Iraq merely becomes a plot point to explore interrelational and sexual struggles, in a way completely removed from the context of the events depicted.9 While entire plays have been devoted to the war issues that Shinn uses as plot points, Dying City only finds in Iraq an excuse to traumatize a wife because of her husband’s pre-existing sexual habits.

Of course, none of this should come as a surprise. Theater is part of culture, and American culture has consistently abrogated its responsibility to acknowledge or engage the violences of the past decade. An official body count for Iraqis killed goes untallied; the coffins

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9 While the specific discussion of soldiers’ stories, particularly upon returning home, is the purview of a later chapter, it’s worth noting here that, while suicides in war zones do occur, this is a fairly fantastical situation that reverses the likelihood of that kind of psychological trauma and escape occurring upon Craig’s return home. Not only does Shinn take Iraq out of history, he reverses the reality he seems so concerned about representing. This is ironic in a play in which a character states, “[I]f you really care about the truth, you can’t just speak to your own tiny group, you have to figure out how to speak to the community” (258).
of soldiers killed in war have only begun to be shown; Congress refuses to hold inquiries into the legality of the Bush administration policies; and large swaths of the war on terror were paid for with debt. It is only natural that a significant portion of the plays that attempted to engage both September 11th and the War in Iraq would also tend to deflect attention from the historical and political contexts for those events and, instead, turn it back to the smallest psychological impacts. While there is certainly room for such work—and a film like *W.* would argue that the political and psychological are inherently interrelated—the end effect of the predominance of these works is the purest form of anti-Brechtian theater: the encouragement of superficial emotional responses, rather than an intellectual engagement of the events presented. As Butler writes,

> Since the events of September 11, we have seen both a rise of anti-intellectualism and a growing acceptance of censorship within the media. This could mean that we have support for these trends within the general population of the United States, but it could also mean that the media function as “public voices” that operate at a distance from their constituency, that both report the “voice” of the government for us, and whose proximity to that voice rests on an alliance or identification with that voice. (Butler 1)

In this context, mediated responses to war do not obscure the violence in a conscious desire to obfuscate, but, instead, because those creating the responses spend so much time around others who do the same that they forget to provide an alternative voice, narrative, or set of questions. In the end, this leads to the preservation of entrenched economic and political power, rather than a challenge to already privileged voices.

Inevitably, when the discussion moves from mass media to American theater, it would seem that the idea of censorship and “public voices” are inherently interrelated. Theater, as
opposed to film or television, rarely approaches the level of mass art; thus, it largely avoids the public and governmental pressures of mass art. Despite occurrences like the NEA Four and the bomb threats over *Corpus Christi*—both of which, interestingly, involved sexuality, not terrorism issues—there is no FCC for the theater world. This allows theater artists the opportunity to provide an alternative public voice, to explore and to question issues not raised in cinema or television. At the same time, the closer an artist moves toward the large theatrical spaces and extended runs of Broadway or similarly financed productions, the more capitalistic pressures there are to discourage complicated intellectual explorations. In the simplest terms, the greater the economic incentives are, the lower the opportunity for risk, innovation, or ideological challenge occurs. Is it any wonder that, arguably, Neil LaBute’s most challenging play, *In the Company of Men*, came at the start of his career, or that many of the more daring works about the “war on terror,” to be discussed throughout this study, came from less established artists? In fact, Shinn himself leads an article discussing self-censorship in the theater (as well as the much more political play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*, whose cancellation at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2006 Shinn had spoken against) with the note, “US theatre now prefers to play it safe rather than risk controversy and alienate mainstream audiences” (88). Shinn writes that American playwrights became aware throughout the Clinton and Bush presidencies that there was not a hunger for truly oppositional political art. When the economy was doing well, audiences did not want stories that laid bare the violence at the heart of this prosperity, that questioned an economy built around exploitation of the world’s poor and the environment, or on an ideology that promoted consumerism. After all, consumers purchase the cultural products that artists create. (91-2)
It would seem that Shinn understands the structural problem in American theater, and, as with Coontz and families, sees it rooted in economics. However, in the psychological and interpersonal focus of his plays, he too often puts the political issues that he seems concerned with on the table, only to walk away from examining them, thereby participating in the same deflection that he critiques. Perhaps, though, the controversy surrounding *Rachel Corrie*, along with a relative degree of success and increased standing in his own career, will provide Shinn the impetus to have his own plays challenge the structure he critiques in defense of plays by others.

**9/11 as Rupture**

The question remains as to whether or not it is possible to write a politically effective domestic drama. Given variations in audience, this question may prove impossible to answer with any degree of accuracy. In closing, I turn to one answer provided by Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros in their play *Omnium Gatherum*: replace the psychological suffering with absurdist probing. *Omnium Gatherum* is best understood as the 9/11 play that Luis Bunuel might have written, a combination of a dinner party that spoofs bourgeois mannerisms and surreal elements that eventually provoke a discussion of terrorism and Western-Middle Eastern relationships. As such, the play opens on an elegant dinner table, complete with chandelier overheard, and a “lively conversation about rhubarb”:

TERENCE: *(Declaring.)* Rhubarb.

JULIA: *(Agreeing.)* Rhubarb.

JEFF: I love rhubarb.

SUZIE: No, it’s a moody fruit. You can only use it in combination. Go on, Khalid.
KHALID: As I was saying—If we could but shrink the earth’s population to a village of precisely 100 people—

ROGER: Oh, no. Is this that?

LYDIA: Let him finish.

KHALID: With the existing human ratios—

ROGER: *(Overlap.)* We all got this on the Internet!

TERENCE: *(Overlap.)* I didn’t!

KHALID: Oh—perhaps, then, if people already knew—

TERENCE: I don’t! *(9)*

And so the play continues, with the inane constantly cutting across the attempts at substantive discussion, and even that substance often coming in the way of obvious clichés, as Roger points out when he notes that everyone has read everything that Khalid is saying on the Internet. This is not only a departure from Bunuel—there were no Muslims drinking wine or surfing the Internet in *Discrete Charms of the Bourgeoisie*—but also from the plays of Christopher Shinn and Neil LaBute. In fact, Rebeck and Gersten-Vassilaros’ play largely works to take the mundane and force it to tell the political and historical contexts surrounding it, rather than using those contexts to explore the mundane. For instance, Roger eventually turns to his companions and says, “I would like to pose a question, and god knows I don’t mean to rile or provoke, but why peace? I mean, indeed. Why?[…]*Hist*orically it is an anomaly. I think we need to examine the possibility that peace is not a beneficial or desirable condition for the human race. If it were, it would have been more readily embraced by now” *(34)*. Once again, the conversation is derailed, both by protests to the statement, and by Khalid finding a fly in his glass. However, as opposed to *Dying City*, where such diversions from the political were the plot, the entire point of
Omnium Gatherum is the character’s inability to sustain an intelligent conversation. In this moment, though, they do return to the discussion at hand, if only briefly:

TERENCE: More along the lines of a child’s fairy tale. Happily ever after, the imagined state of bliss which can never be fully or even partially described within the story itself because it is in fact a fantasy.

LYDIA: So, the human race, people, women, when we say we want peace we don’t really mean it.

TERENCE: Perhaps peace is a romantic assumption that has no grounding in a post-modern utopia.

LYDA: Hey. Enough with the British superiority! Everything is so articulate and calming and dismissive when the fact is, this is just another version of some imperialistic old world excuse to be the right one in the room.

TERENCE: Well. En garde.

LYDIA: (Riled and direct.) We don’t want peace? Let me tell you something. Women and children want peace and this is, you know, male narcissism, this global male narcissism, that we are all like you, want what you want, greed, winning, well, that’s not what’s driving the rest of us and the fact is some of us really do want the world to survive. What men want is not what everyone wants!

SUZIE: I’m an incest survivor, too.

LYDIA: No no. Don’t do that. We’re not victims together here, I’m not a victim and I have no interest in participating in some ludicrous victim identity. Everyone else seems to be really interested in that and I’ll tell you something: I am not.

KHALID: Who are you in community with? You must be very lonely.
LYDIA: Because I don’t identify myself as a victim, I’m lonely?

SUZIE: I’m never lonely.

KHALID: I’m lonely all the time. Which is why, you see, without community we have no container for our lives.

ROGER: Oh for god’s sake. I’m not community with you. I agree with her.

LYDIA: Don’t agree with me. I am so not in community with you.

JEFF: God, this is good.

SUZIE: Thank you. I had help! (LYDIA, mocking her.) Thousands of slaves!

TERENCE: Stunning. Bravo!

SUZIE: And wait till you see what else is coming!

TERENCE: Don’t tell!

SUZIE: I won’t! I won’t!

JEFF: Are you going to have any?

LYDIA: No, you can have it all.

JEFF: You could have the corn stuff.

SUZIE: It’s relish, dear. Relish.

LYDIA: What’s in it?

SUZIE: Fresh September corn off the cob, red pepper, onion and roasted red peppers.

LYDIA: Fine. I’ll take it. (35)

What makes this passage fascinating—and worth quoting at such length—is the arc of it, which moves from global politics in the discussion of peace, to gender politics, which descend into stereotypes of what men and women want, to interpersonal politics while the characters talk
about community and uncomfortably group into who they agree with regarding relish. It represents a systematic deconstruction of the ability to think internationally and structurally (positively or negatively), as well as an examination of the communal pull to avoid the complexly and controversially political. If politics is the art of the possible, these characters represent the converse, the inability to maintain either dialogue or imagination, to conceive of a new possibility for political order, which is to say they are most people, and the play examines them as such, rather than justifying them as such. As Ben Brantley writes, “What makes this play sing and sting is its radical yet perfectly organic shifts in tone. Tragedy and triviality, ponderousness and pettiness are mixed into a salad so deliriously tossed that you can’t separate the individual ingredients. The play’s strength is its sloppiness, a sense that orderly boundaries—even those separating the living and the dead—have blurred into chaos.” As such, the play attempts to examine sociality and political discourse in a post-9/11 context, rather than using 9/11 as a plot device that encourages audiences to ignore social-political relationships.

Meanwhile, a more surreal, and insidious element weaves its way through the play. The first glimpse of this element comes when, according to the stage directions, “SUZIE disappears into a smoking red hole in the ground. ROGER stands up, startled” (12). In true Bunuelian style, however, most of the characters, saving Roger, do not notice this and continue their conversation until Suzie reappears, through a trap door, “holding a bottle up as she enters” (12). Later, the stage directions indicate the “sound of helicopters and explosions in the distance” (25). One natural interpretation of this dark magic and external chaos, when coupled with the characters endless verbal sparring, is that they are all trapped in a Sartrean hell. At the same time, these “unrealistic” elements both puncture and force the characters’ discussions, constantly showing the inanity of their dialogue punctuated with political clichés and gourmet foods in a
world where there’s so little that they can control or understand—or that they attempt to control and understand.

This dark disorder is then brought to the forefront with the entrance of Mohammed, who greets Suzie by saying, “These are the people you spoke of? The ones who are interested in our story? You say you want to know us. Is that what you want” and continues after Suzie’s prompt, “The world does not want to know the Arab. You only want to erase the Arab. You want to take our land, and steal our oil, to corrupt our women, demean our culture, and degrade our god. That is what you want” (59). However, Mohammed saves his most vitriolic criticism for an Arabic exchange with Khalid:

Mohammed: You are no Arab, infidel, you have abandoned your god, you have abandoned your god and your people, shame, you are a disgrace to all Arabs!

Khalid: Murderer! No one is going to paradise for these acts, what do you know of god? Monster! You have abandoned your god! You disgust god! (59)

The argument eventually devolves to Jeff punching Mohammed, then gagging him and binding his hands with napkins. However, the rules of polite society inevitably intervene and force the dinner guests to come together, after another exchange between Khalid and Mohammed:

LYDIA: What, what did you say to him?

KHALID: I asked him if he is hungry. He says yes. We must feed him, Suzie.

SUZIE: Une place à la table maintenant!

TERENCE: Quite right. Can’t have him critiquing our manners, on top of everything else he has to complain about.

ROGER: Hey. Call me crazy, but I don’t actually want to have dinner with a destroyer of the universe!
JULIA: Is there an extra plate?

SUZIE: Of course. *Mais oui!!*

...

*(MOHAMMED looks at her. She unties his hands. All are watching, alert. He reaches over and picks up a fork. For a moment, it looks like a weapon in his hand, then he starts to eat with it. All visibly relax, watch him eat for a moment).*

MOHAMMED: This is very good.

SUZIE: And, it’s been blessed by a Rabbi. *(Everyone is shocked)*. I mean, oh god, I mean, not the Rabbi, it’s whatsiscalled, the the the Muslim version of of of kosher—

MOHAMMED: Halel.

Like an elementary school telling of the first Thanksgiving, the characters are able to gather around the table together and share a meal, with the promise of peace in the air. In fact, Jeff even tells, while sitting at table with Mohammed, his story of being a firefighter on September 11th:

It was strange. Going down there? We knew it was bad. You could see, we’re in the engine shooting down Flatbush, watching the smoke pouring out of the tower, someone says Jesus God, there’s another one. Watching the second plane hit. Running into the buildings. People, falling, raining from the sky. I never saw that before. None of us did. We thought they would hold, the towers, they were like beings, huge old men holding themselves up as long as they could, so that we could save as many, so many pouring down, while we rushed up and up, to the clouds and the wind and the fire. People ask me about life and death. I don’t
know what to say, they’re the same thing to me now. Harm was…I don’t know. I have children. But what else is my life for? We went up and up until the old men couldn’t hold anymore, and death came down on all of us. The living and the dead. *(Beat, embarrassed.)* Is there dessert? *(70)*

As the play draws to an end, both extremities of American political discourse—a Muslim terrorist and an American firefighter—are placed at a dinner party together, both tell their stories, and both turn toward dessert. It would seem that there is an implicit message that dialogue, that coming together and breaking of bread (or sharing tea) is what is needed to restore order and meaning after great suffering. That is, until the last stage directions of the play.

“*[Roger] takes [Suzie’s] hand,*” the directions begin. “*They start to dance.* TERENCE lights up. LYDIA takes a moment to reflect on her stomach. KHALID and JULIA kiss. MOHAMMED eats, hungry. The music continues. In the distance, the rumble of faint explosions can be heard. The explosions get closer and closer until one loud, terrifying explosion bathes the room in a sudden white light” *(74).* Unlike the characters in *Where We Live* sharing cigarettes, unlike the silence at the end of *The Mercy Seat,* the violence continues on in *Omnium Gatherum,* hollow platitudes and shared food, discussions that personalize the political are not enough in and of themselves to save the characters. True, this could be seen as the most devastating form of nihilism—even sitting down with one’s enemy will not save anyone—except there is no reason to believe that these characters are the only political possibility. Instead, it is the characters representative of most American domestic drama, with their need to destroy history and context, who are being wiped clean from the dinner table, leaving an open expanse waiting for another political dialogue. The play does not say what this dialogue might look like, but it certainly knows that it is not to be found discussing relish.
Because the alternative engagement, though considered, never appears on stage, *Omnium Gatherum* has left ample opportunity for other playwrights to explore the questions it asks about domesticity, dialogue, and the war on terror. Taken on whole, at least within American responses, they have steadfastly refused this line of dramatic exploration. This is not due to a lack of domestic dramas, as the lauded productions of *Next Fall* (2009), *Dividing the East* (2007), and *Becky Shaw* (2009) indicate. In fact, the 2009 production of Donald Marguiles *Time Stands Still* merely replicated the tendency of using the Iraq War and September 11th as a backdrop for the exploration of relationships, rather than politics, instead of providing the alternative dialogue for which *Omnium Gatherum* opened the door. Just as the American presidency changed hands and the American war policies remained the same, one domestic drama after another finds its way to major American stages, and the narrative, wrought with narcissistic navel-gazing, also remains the same. And the two are certainly related, as the culture industry that turns attention from the war deaths helps maintain the political structure that allows continuing violence to represent itself as change. And neither the curtains over Broadway stages nor those at major party political rallies will be pulled back to reveal a moment of truth.
Chapter Five

Singing to the Choir: Musical Theater and (Un)Acceptable Critiques

On the eighth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, memorials were carried out throughout New York City. In the morning, amidst a driving rainstorm—notably, the opposite of the sunny morning of the attacks—the names of the 2,751 people who died in the World Trade Center attacks were read, broken only by the four moments of silence marking each plane strike and the moment when each tower fell. As the day moved forward, St. Paul’s Chapel, where rescue workers once sought food and shelter, hosted a midday service, where the rector spoke about forgiveness. Threaded between the chapel and the metal fences that now line Ground Zero were a row of “truthers,” asking passers-by if they knew the “truth” about 9/11, and declaring that the attacks had been an “inside job.” And as day turned to night, a concert marking the first National Day of Service and Remembrance began in midtown, with Jim Riches speaking about losing his son in the attacks and John Oberst premiering his 9/11 song, “Tuesday.” Back downtown, actors took to the stage in productions of *Aftermath*, about Iraqi refugees, and *Oohrah*, about an American soldier returning home from Iraq.¹ And as the New York Buddhist Church sent floating lanterns out into the water around Pier 40, so too did the twin beams signifying the fallen towers light the downtown night, reaching up into the sky until they were wrapped in the storm clouds above. And so too did the lights of Broadway, dark after the attacks eight years before, rise again, in a city where most people went to work as they had done on a clear morning eight years before. Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig continued with the previews of *A Steady Rain*. Jeff Daniels and James Gandolfini continued their insults in *The God of

¹ Both of these works will be discussed later, in chapters on representations of Iraqi voices and stories of soldiers’ returns, respectively.
Carnage. And the Phantom of the Opera lost the girl yet again. War was far from the Great White Way, except in one house, slightly northeast of Times Square, where the Hirschfeld Theatre was hosting a revival of Hair. Tellingly, the only space available on Broadway for an examination of war during a time of war was in song and nostalgia. This tendency to explore war through song is not an uncommon one. In fact, the struggle between consumerist and political impulses in contemporary American and Egyptian theater can be seen most clearly in musicals, such as Hair and Bush Is Bad in New York and El Lab fel Demagh in Cairo (often translated as Messing with the Mind, but perhaps more accurately rendered as Mind Games). Additionally, the critical receptions over Bush Is Bad and El Lab fel Demagh, in particular, also display the Orientalist paradigms that Edward Said long ago warned are still present in the receptions of political art, as well as debates over what is meant by political effectiveness of art, a debate powerfully critiqued by Tim Miller and David Román’s analysis of the idea of “preaching to the choir.” Through such an analysis, all three works can be seen as emblematic of a political and artistic system that prefers easy, and easily commodified, sloganeering over truly defined political alternatives.

Protest Nostalgia

Of course, the choice of staging Hair is to be expected, as, since the time of its original 1967 production, Hair has always been the choice of works to mount during a time of war, meandering further from its contexts and radical intervention with each passing year. Hair was originally conceived as a radical work in the late 1960s, and “many [people] were confused, perplexed, even offended [by the original Broadway production]; others saw Hair as proclaiming a revolution in American life” (Jones 249). As David Walsh and Len Platt write,
In one sense it was a conceptual musical based around the politics and lifestyle that it proclaimed and represented through a new alternative form of social organization of life that it advocated—the tribe. In this context, *Hair* grew out of the emotional turmoil of the Vietnam War, which generated an antiestablishment politics that promoted dropping out as a reconstitutive political program. With very little in the way of narrative story line, this loosely structured musical celebrated the lifestyle of hippies and flower children, who greeted the dawning of the age of Aquarius by opposing the Vietnam War and the draft, and bourgeois values and standards of behavior and dress. (148)

While there is plenty of debate that can be had over both the workability and idyllic nature of the sociality and politics of *Hair*, the work at least represented an attempt to rethink dramatic form, with its nearly plot-free, acid-inspired structure, for a new era and to reconceive social spaces and relationships, with its call for communalism. In fact, the show was so radical and “obscene” for some at the time that it was banned in 1970 by Boston’s official censor. Meanwhile, in songs like “Easy to Be Hard,” where the character Sheila questions the tendency of activists to care deeply about those far away while inflicting pain on those in their own lives, there are even moments of questioning the same counterculture that the musical promotes and celebrates. However, as time has passed, it has also become easy to solidify a nostalgic image of *Hair*, to see it as representative of a glorious moment of challenges overcome, rather than as speaking to any struggles in the present. It allows the audience to sing familiar songs about war, rather than contemplate the violences contained therein. As John Bush Jones writes, “Because of its still-popular musical score and its simultaneous celebration of both group rebellion and individualism, *Hair* continues to have an enormous and dedicated following among the young”
And it is in this space of nostalgia and musical celebration that *Hair* returned to Broadway in 2009.

As opposed to the 2005 Gate Theatre production in London, where the book was rewritten to make it explicitly about the war in Iraq, there was no attempt to contemporize the 2009 Broadway revival. Instead, it played as pure nostalgia, a tribute to the political protests and existential searchings of the sixties, without any way for a contemporary audience member to find his or her means to engage the world around him or her. True, the resonance of the anti-war critique remains, and remains fairly obvious after a decade of endless warfare; unfortunately, rather than a cry out against the violences in contemporary society, the show runs more as a celebration of the political possibilities—and music—that once were. Part of this is a function of time: how can the show play the same to audiences who either grew up with the music or view the music as reminding them of their youth? And how can a war without a draft or bodies broadcast on the news feel as urgent? Given this temporal change, it should be no wonder that the audience would find the aggressive breaking of the fourth wall funny, or that “Let the Sun Shine In” would play as a celebration, rather than a desperate call for a better world. Perhaps it should also be no surprise that the show’s own website commodifies the anti-institutional politics of the musical to the extent of having a tab that reads, “We Got Merch, Brother!” The show turns the critique of war into the kind of capitalist free-for-all that tends to precipitate the necessity of war. The commercialization of Broadway, after all, is no secret in need of detailed analysis here, and the fact that *Hair* would now draw an audience in suits with one hundred dollar tickets likely speaks only to the fate of all art over an extended duration of time. That said, it does press the issue of the effectiveness of the musical as an art form. This is particularly the case given that live performance always exists in the present, and there is no de facto reason
why a contemporary production must choose nostalgia as its mode of presentation. Instead, it must be asked whether contemporary musical theater merely allows people to reconfirm what they already believe about themselves, or does it provide the possibility for a critical examination of the external world. Is there more than preaching—or singing—to the choir?

Typically, the charge of preaching to the choir is often an acritical one, haphazardly applied to any work that portrays oppositional politics. As Tim Miller and David Román write of queer performance art,

This charge assumes that a stable and static mass has arrived dully into an imagined state of conversion—a condition that, though not articulated, is both assumed and belittled. To claim that artists are only preaching to the converted implies a fixed position for the audience assembled that trivializes the ever-changing and never immediately apparent needs and desires of queer spectators.

(177)

In other words, the label of preaching to the choir requires a homogenous oversimplification of audience composition that anyone who has spent much time inside of a theater (or choir) should know better than to assume. After all, while there may be demographic tendencies, on any given night, there may also be those that break the demographic mold. As Miller and Román note, “‘[T]he converted’ need to be understood as a dynamic assembly that both individually and communally enters into the space of performance to sustain the very state of conversion. Truth be told, however, the converted are never wholly converted” (177). Indeed, even the most ardent believers in an idea, or those fighting the hardest in a political struggle need to be reaffirmed every now and then both that they are making progress and that they are not alone, and the live,
communal space of theater can be a place to explore such possibilities, while the critique of “preaching to the converted” can be deployed to silence the message:

What people are often really saying when they drag out the “preaching to the converted” critique is: “I’m tired of having angry black men, scary women, and shameless fags disturbing my post-theatre dinner!” Even more dangerously, with the byzantine workings of oppression culture this dismissive can also be a method—for members of any addressed community—to silence the heat and danger of a message that just maybe hits too close to home. (Miller and Román 187)

Of course, being one of the NEA Four, Miller would know something specific about attempts at silencing. But Miller, a performance artist, also worked in a very different realm than Broadway musicals, where the economic constraints often function as a form of soft censorship that regulates the political possibilities of musical theater in the same way that the state censorship of Egyptian theater also does. Additionally, while preaching to the converted, or singing to the choir, may be a more complicated act, the act of preaching ideally involves not only reaffirming faith, but challenging those practices and ideology that undercut the practice of faith, or those ideas of the converted audience that interfere with their ability to engage the outside world more critically.

As Alisa Solomon writes in her critical discussion of The Laramie Project, “[E]ven if most of the theaters are offering a slightly higher-brow version of TV, theater at least has the potential to demand something more of its audiences” (4). For Solomon, the dramatic possibilities of theater present the opportunity to explore ideas that “unconverted” audiences

2 The NEA Four—Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes—were performance artists who had their National Endowment for the Arts grants vetoed after peer review because the content was deemed obscene.
might not otherwise consider, allowing for easy digestion of the difficult: “More important, plays make ideas palpable. And in living up to Chekhov’s principle that their political power comes not from offering the program, but from their correct presentation of the problem, they provide an implicit analysis. … Plays, though, more powerfully than any other form, can ignite dialectical thinking and challenge the moral imagination” (Solomon 4). By seeing actors explore actions and possibilities, delve into problems, onstage, even if not in a Boalian sense, theater creates the possibility to breathe life into different imagined forms of sociality and problem solving and to inspire the audience to attempt to explore alternatives in the outside world: it can help the imagination of audience members regardless of their level of conversion.

Unfortunately, it cannot do all of the work in and of itself, as Solomon also writes: “Certainly theater cannot be expected to do, or even identify, the work of activism. But is there any hope that the unique sort of collective illusion-making that playwrights craft can offer new ways for us to engage ideas and feel for others in ways that differ from the mass manipulations turning us over to sponsors and into cheerleaders for the politics of vengeance?” (10). For this, it would seem the critical engagement of possibilities and the breath of faith to an unhomogenous audience—that is shown in the work of Solomon and Miller and Román, respectively—would need to join together, and the play would need to have a measure of hope for the wounded and Brechtian inspiration for the unconverted, as well as a more critical model for even the converted. Unfortunately, most musical responses to 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have succeeded more, as with the audience for the revival of Hair, in reconfirming the value of the audience’s preconceived dispositions than at challenging those ideas to reconfigure the social and political spaces that exist outside (or inside) theaters.
Cairene Cabaret

Interestingly, this fact would appear to be true in the context of Cairene musical performance, as well as in New York. As is the case for contemporary Broadway musicals, the Egyptian state theaters that run large musicals in Cairo tend not to be the spaces for critical political discourse, but, instead, for splashy musicals that value easy entertainment over complexity of analysis. Part of this is the state-run nature of the non-commercial theaters.³ After all, why would the Mubarak regime have invested in staging critiques of itself, which, as noted in the first chapter, are always implicit in critiques of the American state as well. Additionally, as is the case with Broadway, the largest of musicals also charge the most for tickets—up to fifty times as much as smaller theaters—limiting themselves to more elite audiences that are often looking for easy entertainment for their entire families, rather than an exploration of the dilemmas facing contemporary Egypt.⁴ Thus, the purview of political musicals typically falls to the independent theater troupes, and it is in this context that Khaled El Sawy and his company, al-Haraka, performed Al Lab fel Demagh at al-Hanagar Theatre in spring 2004.

The play blends critiques of the American invasion of Iraq and funding of the Israeli occupation of Palestine with discussions of contemporary social problems in Egypt, such as the cost of marriage and growing consumerism, in a way that is much more complex than the play’s

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³ Commercial theater, in Egypt, with stars like Adel Eman and Mohammed Soby tends to run primarily in the summer and only to the richest audiences, often consisting of a large number of tourists from the Gulf.
⁴ The nadir of this during my time in Cairo was the long-running production Ya Donna, Ya Harami, which included a midget dressed as a child doing one-arm pushups, and actresses who sat on stage never speaking, essentially providing scenery during the beach scene. Granted, not all productions stoop this low—and many Egyptians in the audience were falling asleep during the meandering, seemingly pointless story—and other works, such as the musical adaptation of Alfred Farag’s Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi and His Servant Quffa attempt to at least stage political critique through a symbolic representation of economic relationships. However, Ya Donna, Ya Harami is a good representation of the kind of musicals that the Ministry of Culture is content investing in, just as The Little Mermaid, while not the pinnacle of Broadway theater, also represents what the Broadway establishment is content to see staged.
“anti-American” reputation would suggest. Given the engagement with American imperialism, the play’s central character, performed by El Sawy is General Fox, whose first lines, sung to the tune of 50 Cent’s “In Da Club,” move from “I love Egyptians a lot, and all the Arab people / I love the Pyramids and sweet raw sugar / Even smelly sewers, fava beans and falafel” to “Fighting is just a must if happiness is to thrive / To bring democracy and free enterprise, / We’ll kill those yucky people and set up the bright” (3). Despite this, when asked about the problems facing Egyptian youth, Fox replies, “Arab youths definitely want a bride!” before having other soldiers produce blow-up Barbie dolls to keep the Arab men company: “First of all, it’s so versatile if you’re on the move. Just pop it in your carry-bag. Second, to inflate it all a young man needs to do is pump it up and it’ll be good to go. Third, its soft texture. It’s made of excellent materials. Fourth, she doesn’t talk at all (whispering) she won’t ask him for dollars. Sixth and the most important is that she’ll be accessible for the under trodden” (4). While the General and the host, Nadia, are interrupted by protesters before he can provide any parallel solutions that might be of use to Egyptian women, the passage does serve a couple of purposes for the play. Thematically, just as invading a country seems a strange way to bring freedom and democracy, providing blow-up dolls to a population struggling with pervasive political, religious, and economic oppression—much of it supported by American policy and dollars—also seems more ideological than workable as a solution for the majority of people of that country. Additionally, the comment provides a setup for introducing the character of Ashraf.

Ashraf is a young Egyptian who has been invited on the show for a regular feature where a member of the audience gets to discuss a problem in his or her life. For Ashraf, this primarily involves being in love with his friend’s sister and struggling to find good employment. This provides an opportunity for the play to explore local issues often ignored in the internationalism

5 The play is structured as an episode of a sentimental Egyptian talk show.
inherent in any engagement of the Egyptian state’s relationship to the war in Iraq. For example, when he is asked, after having said that they make love out of wedlock, how he would respond if his sister were the one being discussed, he replies, “Well of course the situation is different. Primarily because my sister wears the hijab … you know what I’m saying? … She’s divorced…but next Ramadan she will be married to my elder cousin who’s also like an uncle to me. He raised us up as kids. Second, I’m a man … it’s okay for me to monkey about here and there … but a daughter is the woman, the reputation, the mother, the homeland … she’s the honour!” (9). Just as General Fox repeats meaningless clichés about the American occupation of Iraq and American love for the Middle East to justify a neocolonialist policy, and just as his solution to the problems in the Arab world took the shape of a gendered answer involving the primacy of male sexual desire, so too does Ashraf repeat clichés about the role of women in Egypt in a way that also shows male sexual desire as more noble and justifiable than that of females. In this way, the play shows the problems of occupation and Western interference as interrelated with the economic, social, and religious problems within Egyptian society, arguing that they are all forms of oppression, some of which have been internalized and accepted by the masses.

While social problems hold the center of the play, it is the violence of war that marks the bookends. The show begins with actors playing Marines, including General Fox, going into the lobby and searching the audience at “gunpoint” before forcing them into the theater. Then, toward the end of the show, General Fox is assassinated during an effort to justify his policies, while images from the war play in the background:

I told you in the first scene fighting is just a must if happiness is to thrive

Iraqi people should have given it up without much trouble
Very good Mr. President you’re stronger than Hitler and Stalin
At your hands the Arabian Peninsula is no longer the Arabs’ own
Why did they have to fight? Now who’s gonna pay the price?
Why don’t you understand Saddam
It was something else…Vietnam
The whole country was fighting
Farmers holding guns
They slaughtered us like sheep
They vexed Mama in the woods!
That’s why we don’t like Intifada
That’s why not cool Hezbollah
We prefer our wars…classic
Not wars of peoples…fanatic
Fighting Saddam and military troupes
Not a day with those fedayeen groups. (38)

He then yells at the audience, “I love Arabs.” In return, a group of “young people,” shoot Fox, while yelling, “Long live freedom…Long live the masses.” Just before his onstage death, Fox utters his final statement: “FUCKIN ARABS.” As he is dying, images of anti-war protests are projected, while “Let the Sun Shine In” plays in the background, thereby inverting the end of *Hair* where the audience comes on stage after a war protestor has been killed, and replacing that corpse with the body of the occupying general (39). This all transforms into the closing song, a cross between *Les Miserables*, *Hair*, and *Waiting for Lefty*, in which the actors sing, while images of people filling streets at the phrase “We’ll see the day” is projected,
We’ll see the day no matter how long we wait

Love will defeat the barricade

And look through the window to see us all

The wall of waiting will crumble

On top of the wicked monsters

The shattered splinter will soak up our blood

Love will generate an explosion

We’ll see the day when love gives birth to an explosion (40)

El Sawy has argued that the shooting on stage occurs when there are no civilian characters on stage (i.e., the killing does not meet the definition of terrorism, which requires violence against civilians), and that “the solution is to get people out onto the streets, not through these kinds of operations.” However, the play’s turn from an act of assassination to a call for “love” and “explosions” provided the opening for an all-too-easy “anti-American” critique in the American press that often simplistically ignored the criticisms of Arab life in the show (MacFarquhar).

This pattern began with Neil MacFarquhar’s Cairo Journal entry “Who Messes with Egyptian Minds? Satirist Points at U.S.” in The New York Times, which begins with a description of the actors playing soldiers entering al-Hanagar’s coffee shop, before turning to a two-paragraph breakdown of the play that centralizes the American role in it:

The scene kicks off a harshly anti-American show called “Messing with the Mind” now playing what passes for Off Broadway in Cairo. The play has been sold out nightly since its opening in late January for what was originally to be a two-week run.
The low-budget production meanders through a thicket of regional issues including the Arab-Israeli dispute, the inability of young people to afford marriage, the dubious appeal of American goods and the mushrooming of satellite television news networks. But it focuses on the American occupation of Iraq and possibly beyond with biting sarcasm.

Barely a clause passes in this analysis without a problem of perspective and context occurring. The idea that a work critiquing America—and almost exclusively through an analysis of American foreign policy: the only American characters on stage being either soldiers or members of the Bush Administration, including Bush himself—is inherently “anti-American” replicates both the bias pushed by the Bush Administration in the lead-up to the Iraq War, as well as, closer to home in Cairo, the charges of anti-Semitism leveled at legitimate criticisms of the Israeli state. Additionally, describing al-Hanagar (a state-owned theater subject to Ministry of Culture censorship) as comparable to a privately-owned, independent Off-Broadway theater undermines the context in which those sold-out shows occurred. After all, part of the reason *El Lab fel Demagh* played to full houses was because many in the audience were so surprised to see such a work on stage in Egypt, a subject position that remains largely unknown to Off-Broadway audiences in Manhattan. Likewise, while the *Times* analysis ticks off a number of the issues mentioned in the play, it returns to an American-centric context, which obscures much of the material making up the center of the play, and encourages a view of the Middle East that ignores an analysis of the lives and struggles of people there, but only see Arabs and Muslims as

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6 In fact, *Assassins*, another work that some would label un-American, would play on Broadway the same spring. Presumably, a work in which one character sings a song encouraging another to shoot Anwar Sadat will not be seen anytime soon on an Egyptian stage. But at least the *Times* Off-Broadway context would make the show seem elite and edgy to readers without any context for the actual performance.
faceless, brown others who exist solely in opposition to America and Americans. It is a form of journalism that epitomizes what Edward Said famously wrote in *Orientalism*:

> This is the apogee of Orientalist confidence. No merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth; no theoretical list of Oriental attributes is without application to the behavior of Orientals in the real world. On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things. (Said 49)

Rather than exploring the legitimate critiques of American militarism in the Middle East, the *Times* simply labels *El Lab fel Demagh* as “harshly anti-American,” a typical why-do-they-hate-us relegation of the work as the standard product of irrational, angry Arabs, rather than deserving of the analysis that a work of British or American political theater might receive. Part of this tendency may derive from the fact that Western news agencies tend not to send their art critics to Cairo for much of any reason. Consequently, while Ben Brantley would travel to London to see *Stuff Happens*, the odds of him seeing the most significant Egyptian play about the war in Iraq are relatively small. Instead, such reporting is left to field correspondents, who may not have much experience analyzing theatrical works.\(^7\)

MacFarquhar was not alone in shaping such a context. Slipped into a piece on Americans as the “Heavies” in Egyptian films, *The Washington Post*’s Daniel Williams writes of the play, in relation to the film *The Night Baghdad Fell*:\(^8\) “The film is only the latest bit of Egyptian pop

\(^7\) A similar paradigm pervades Western museums, which never lack for ancient Egyptian artifacts, but seem unable to find contemporary Egyptian art to display. Tellingly, an art museum with such is in the same corner of Cairo that contains al-Hanagar.

\(^8\) The film, a tale of a family’s attempt to develop a “deterrent” weapon to protect Egypt from a possible American attack after the invasion of Iraq, is a complicated mix of popular fears, nationalism, popular psychology, and gender stereotypes that would require a detailed analysis of its own. Unsurprisingly, the *Post* did not aim for this level of critique.
culture to display deep unease about Americans. Beginning two years ago [2004], Yanks emerged as bad guys on Cairo stages. In one play, ‘Messing With the Mind,’ the audience was ordered around by wild-eyed ushers dressed as Marines.” The fact that the author was unable to distinguish between members of the cast—which should have been obvious when they took to the stage, assuming the author actually attended the show or talked to anyone involved—and ushers, provides a clear example of the kind of attention that the American media found Egyptian art deserving of, and, yet again, the part of the play that explored problems in contemporary Egypt unrelated to American militarism was ignored. True, the Post’s natural audience is Americans more concerned about their own portrayal than the problems of contemporary Egypt, but that does not justify entirely obscuring such representations to replicate a simplistic stereotype of anti-Americanism. This is a stereotype continued when Williams returns to his discussion of film in the following paragraph:

Ugly Americans began to emerge on-screen last year. In "Alexandria, New York," director Yusef Chahine rebuked U.S. attitudes toward Arabs. "No Problem, We're Getting Screwed," a black comedy, told the tale of an Egyptian who sends his son to Iraq to deliver mangoes and then must travel there to get him out of an American jail. Along the way, the father tumbles into the hole where Saddam Hussein was hiding, gets caught in insurgent crossfire, is arrested by the Americans and is taken to President Bush. Bush forces him to wear a beard and confess to bombing the American Embassy. Somehow, the Egyptian escapes, outwits his captors, sells his mangoes and gets his son back home.
Though a detailed analysis of Egyptian film is not the purview of this chapter, there are two important notes here. First, the film *Alexandria...New York*, an epilogue of sorts to Chahine’s famous Alexandria trilogy that goes unmentioned in the article, presents both positive and negative images of Americans. In fact, the basic structure of the film is to use the lover of the main character’s youth as an embodiment of the ideal America that he loved, and their arrogant son as the image of the America of the Bush era. That the most arrogant character is an Egyptian American goes unmentioned in Williams’ article. Similarly, in the second film, which has an English cover title of *Excuse Us*, the “somehow” of how the character escapes occurs when a Marine who the father had befriended at his coffee shop in Giza aids the father in escaping from prison. One would think this might be an important detail in an article about images of “ugly Americans.”

It has been said that partisan politics often stop at the nation’s borders. This would also seem to be true of contextualized and sophisticated artistic analysis, as well as accurate depictions of the Middle East, at least where Egyptian drama and film about Iraq are concerned. And so, instead of art criticism, what one is left with in discussions of *El Lab fel Demagh* is a look-how-much-they-hate-us justification for continued violence. As Said notes, “The closeness between politics and Orientalism, or to put it more circumspectly, the great likelihood that ideas about the Orient drawn from Orientalism can be put to political use, is an important yet extremely sensitive truth” (Said 96). Interestingly, in the last edition of *Orientalism* published before his death, Said noted the precise connection between the circulation of racist motifs about the Middle East and the war in Iraq, writing, “Without a well-organized sense that these people

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9 Strangely, Williams did provide more depth to some of these works in his earlier article, typically titled, “Anti-Americanism a Hit with Egyptian Audiences,” though Chahine was still associated with Shaaban Abdel Rehim’s song “I Hate Israel.” That Williams would provide less depth in a later article raises a number of interesting questions about political motivations and representations of the Middle East.
over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values—the very core of traditional
Orientalist dogma[…]there would have been no [Iraq] war” (xx). The replication of images of
Arab violence, hatred of Americans, and threat to democracy and freedom help create the
framework in which the justification of war was made easy, and the Orientalist tropes, as noted
above, continued well after the invasion.

The Art of the Acceptable Critique

Ironically, despite all the “anti-American” criticisms, El Lab fel Demagh was much more
mildly critical of American policy—and Americans—than the cabaret that would take stage in
New York the following year, after George W. Bush’s reelection. Titled Bush Is Bad: The
Musical Cure for the Blue-State Blues, Joshua Rosenbaum’s show moves between songs like
“New Hope for the Fabulously Wealthy” and “The Gay Agenda” in its skewering of the Bush
Administration and the various forces, as seen by Rosenbaum, that supported it. Interestingly,
though, the show opens with a song whose title is taken from the London Daily Mirror’s
response to the reelection of Bush, or “the smirking chimp that currently occupies the White
House,” as he is called in the show’s lead-in: “How Can 59 Million People Be So Dumb?”:

How can fifty-nine million people be so dumb, dumb, dumb?
How can fifty-nine million people be so dumb, da-da-da-da dumb?
Now our senses are reeling
Our brains are congealing
And we’re feeling exceedingly glum
How can 59,054,087 people be so dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb…?
The song continues in a similar fashion, including the line, “How can fifty-nine million people be so easy to delude?” The song, like the rest of the show, is performed in a tongue-in-check comical manner that has as much fun with the musical revue style as with the politics that it mocks. At the same time, the basic premise of the opening number is that everyone in the show (and, by extension, the audience) is more informed and knowledgeable than everyone who voted for George W. Bush’s reelection.

This is not to say that the show avoids dealing with specific political issues. There are, in fact, songs like “New Hope for the Fabulously Wealthy” and “The Gay Agenda” that engage issues like wealth distribution and gay rights. In fact, the show closes with a song, “Good Conservative Values III,” where a choiresque group sings about contemporary events for the third time in the revue. In the last installment, the lyrics changed to follow the news. Some of these, listed in the CD’s packaging, included,

Good conservative values have
Been up against a wall
Poor Libby has just been indicted,
And even Rove may take a fall.
Bill Frist received a subpoena
We wonder who gets the prison cell
Left free by Judy Miller
…
Good conservative values mean
A hurricane attack
Will leave you shit out of luck
If you are poor or you are black.
Too bad a once proud city has
Been turned into a sunk port.
Thank God it was just New Orleans,
Not precious Kennebunkport.
Perhaps, though, the show reaches its high point earlier, when the performers enact a sweeping arrangement of quotes from Bush’s speeches:
I think we all agree the past is over
Will the highways of the Internets become too few
Rarely is the question asked is our kids learned
Home is important; it’s important to have a home
Families is where our nations find hope, where our wings take dreams
If we don’t succeed, we run the risk of failure
It is a time of sorrow and sadness when we lose the loss of a life
Put food on your family; make them fly higher.
As was the case with *El Lab fel Demagh*, the show puts together a mix of jokes about political figures and topical critiques of specific policies, ranging from the above mocking of George W. Bush’s syntactic struggles to the previously noted criticisms of the handling of Hurricane Katrina and the Valerie Plame investigation. The striking difference is that *Bush Is Bad* moves its criticism outside of the political culture to all Americans who would support George W. Bush’s election and policies, yet, it somehow avoided the “anti-American” label that was so easily applied to *El Lab fel Demagh.*
Writing for *The New York Times*, which used such labels for Khaled El Sawy’s show, Jason Zinoman declared, “Joshua Rosenblum, who plays his own pastiche score on the piano, is like a more partisan version of Mark Russell, the inside-the-Beltway satirist who lampoons politicians with enough geniality to soften the edge of his humor. This show might be a little more strident; at one point the actors advocate impeachment. But its tone never stays earnest for long.” Similarly, Zinoman sees the sold-out shows for *Bush Is Bad* as an indicator of the enduring “heartache” of Democrats after the 2004 election, not as representative of a broad-based hatred of the country or critique of all of American society.

In fact, the deepest criticism of the show in reviews was simply that it was too easily, and simply, preaching to the choir. As Simon Saltzman wrote for *Curtain Up*,

> Preaching to the choir may be in part therapeutic, and in the case of *Bush Is Bad*, even empowering. However, there is also a predictable aspect to Rosenblum’s parodic punches. The format is simple, almost simplistic in its presentation. A pianist…shares the stage with Kate Baldwin, Neal Mayer, Tom Treadwell…If our willingness to be surprised, shocked and awed is too rarely rewarded, it is due more to the fact that the administration’s embarrassing faux pas and grievous failures are already old news.

In other words, any failings in the work were not part of any Manhattan political bias, or even artistic shortcomings by those involved in the process, but simply arose directly out of how easily predictable the base incompetence of the Bush Administration made the political critiques. Writing of the “showstopper” nature of the song “In His Own Words,” *Off Broadway’s* Matthew Murray makes a similar point:
Well, at least among the liberals and Democrats in attendance, which I’d estimate as roughly 99.99% of the audience, give or take 0.00%. Chances are, conservatives and Republicans won’t feel particularly comfortable attending this show; nothing that Rosenblum has written is likely to convert anyone to his side.

It’s hard to have too much sympathy for them, though: What else could they possibly expect from Bush Is Bad? Anti-gardening agitprop?

Not only are the political songs of Bush Is Bad entertaining, but anyone who disagrees should not blame the content of the show, but simply the fact that he or she was dumb enough to attend something he or she might disagree with in the first place, which, God forbid, should never actually happen in the theater.

This analysis is the exact opposite of the American media’s approach to El Lab fel Demagh. Whereas the criticisms in that play, coming from Egyptians, were “anti-American,” in Bush Is Bad, any weaknesses in the show were because of the “old news” of the Bush Administration’s failures (i.e., the same American state that El Sawy was criticizing). Whereas the Western journalists felt put off by being shepherded into the theater by actors playing Marines in El Lab fel Demagh, Murray says that any Republican who goes to Bush Is Bad shouldn’t be sympathized with because he or she should know what the play is doing (apparently, it’s somehow surprising that a liberal Egyptian might have a problem with the invasion of Iraq). And, whereas Bush Is Bad is seen as being therapeutic for Democrats dealing with the devastation of their electoral defeat, works like El Lab fel Demagh are seen only as displaying “ugly Americans,” rather than soothing the psychological wounds left by the shock of the fall of Baghdad, a trauma displayed in The Night Baghdad Fell, and, more eloquently, in the
film *Basra* (2008).\(^{10}\) Granted, the articles covering *Bush Is Bad* were written by actual theater critics, rather than general Cairo bureau journalists or freelancers; however, one would think that, if Democrats were traumatized by an election loss predicted in polls, the collapse of one of the historically most powerful and cultured nations in the Arab world might also leave a level of shock that satire could also therapeutically relieve. Instead, what the juxtaposition demonstrates is that the very same media organizations, if not individual writers, that take the calamity of the Iraq War as axiomatic in their coverage of the Middle East, in particular, and Egyptian theater, specifically, reinforce the stereotypes that help allow for such wars. Returning to the conclusion of the last edition of *Orientalism*, the problem with this dynamic—as well as part of the solution—is clear:

> The point I want to conclude with now is to insist that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like “America,” “the West,” or “Islam” and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power…But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction. (Said xxviii-xxix)

Unfortunately, it is also in the breaking down of binaries and the challenging of easy categories that both of these musicals are at their weakest, and where they find one unified piece of criticism. As noted above, *Bush Is Bad* easily fell into the “preaching to the choir” criticism.

\(^{10}\) The latter film sets a love story among a group of friends against the lead-up to and invasion of Iraq, which emotionally devastates the entire circle, as the war is always playing in the background on televisions throughout the film.
Similarly, in her review of *El Lab fel Demagh*, Nehad Selaiha writes that, while “hilarious,” the play lapsed into easy political binaries without offering more complicated solutions to the problems presented in the play:

El-Sawy’s *Messing with the Mind* was a timely reminder of what we are letting ourselves in for. If the media in the US and Israel is distorting us, eroding our individuality as human beings, and if we pay them back in a similar coin, distorting them out of all recognition—and granted there is a lot of injustice in the world—is the solution simply exploding yourself or bulldozing as many houses and people as you can, as the play seems to infer? *Messing with the Mind* was a deeply painful experience on both the political and existential levels. I would like to think it was cathartic for some. As for the actors and singers, I owe them an apology. This was an instance where art came too close to reality and it is to their credit that it did. I could imagine them doing their skit in many anti-war, anti-globalisation demonstrations all over the world. They would be at home in Paris, London, New York and San Francisco. So what are we talking about?

Though Selaiha’s criticism oversimplifies the ending of the play when she writes that the only solution El-Sawy offers is “suicide-bombing,” without taking note of the call to rise up in the streets that ends the play, the basic concern of falling into facile binaries is interesting.\(^\text{11}\) One, though, as argued above, the “anti-American” label is a problematic, inaccurate, and superficial label for the work, the use of such binaries makes the application of such a label easier, particularly for reporters writing for a distant audience. More to the point, it begs the question:

\(^1\) Of course, part of the reason the two can easily be elided is because the call to take to the streets comes immediately after a suicide bombing, which could make what El-Sawy is calling for people to do in those streets a little less clear.
as with the “preaching to the choir” epithet applied to *Bush Is Bad*, what is the functional goal of these plays? Do they aspire to more than easy catharsis and laughs?

Of course, this question itself falls into a facile binary, with humor and catharsis on one side, and meaningful political work on the other, which is not the goal of this analysis. Instead, I want to return to the discussion of the problematic nature of the “preaching to the choir” critique that began this analysis, and the idea that political theater, at its best works as a helix where the need for hope is intertwined with Brechtian thought, as well as some proposal of a way forward. Here, these two plays find their greatest weaknesses: not in a simplistic anti-Americanism or anti-Republicansim, but in their focus on stating the problem, and laughing at it, to the exclusion of providing someplace for the emotions inspired in the audience to go. *Bush Is Bad*, for example, rests squarely on the assumption that electing John Kerry, who voted for the war in Iraq, would have improved everything in the country, a proposition that seems even more absurd on the other side of the election of Barack Obama, and the Obama Administration’s continuation of many Bush Administration foreign and economic policies, personnel, and security state practices. Similarly, while *El Lab fel Demagh* does have the call to take to the streets at the end, it does not provide a particularly clear answer as to what people are supposed to demand or find there. True, the basic problems of political, economic, and religious oppression in Egypt would have been fairly clear to El Sawy’s audience. It’s also true, however, that taking to the streets the following autumn did not change the results of the undemocratic reelection of Hosni Mubarak. In and of itself, this does not invalidate the call to action,12 but it does raise the question of what kind of world should be realized when the people rise up against government

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12 In fact, years later, Egyptians have clearly demonstrated that they have a solid grasp of what to do in the streets, and El Sawy was among them there.
oppression. Neither play makes any attempt to imagine what that might look like, something that even *Hair* once strived to do.

As noted at the top of this chapter, modern interpretations of *Hair*, particularly the 2009 Broadway production tend to be highly commodified. However, as the *Hair* cast’s rallying for marriage equality demonstrated, there are possibilities for political action within the commodified musical system. In fact, the company went beyond singing at local rights rallies in New York to canceling a matinee performance to attend the October 11, 2009 National Equality March in Washington, D.C., a sharp break from Broadway tradition, whereby shows are generally only canceled due to internal labor strikes (“Cast”; “Defying”; Healy). Though what an active, resistant political life looks like will be discussed in more depth in the chapter on Naomi Wallace that concludes this study, these actions taken by cast of *Hair* demonstrate that true political change, particularly within a corporate system, occurs when a politically committed life and a politically committed aesthetic engage in perpetual praxis and continual dialogue. Unfortunately, the *Hair* cast’s choice to simultaneously participate in corporate clothing marketing makes this level of commitment difficult (Edroso). After all, how can one rally for marriage rights while also supporting the economic—and by extension, political—structure of one’s own oppression? As the classic labor tune once asked, “Which side are you on?” In the end, the cast of *Hair*, like their production, desires the shiny veneer of political struggle without the substantive commitment of challenging political assumptions. Similarly, the productions of *El Lab fel Demagh* and *Bush Is Bad* sought to amuse and enflame their audiences at their political circumstances, without providing them a means to overturn the political and economic structures of their own oppression. And the reviews of their productions reinscribed this superficiality, while adding a layer of Orientalist bigotry for good measure. Unfortunately, as
the ensuing chapters will demonstrate, the musical was not alone in its practice of superficial politicking without providing any substantive alternatives.
Chapter Six

The War Without Context: Staging Afghan History

In his 2004 State of the Union address, American President George W. Bush declared, “The men and women of Afghanistan are building a nation that is free and proud and fighting terror and America is honored to be their friend” (Garamore). This statement was typical of Bush’s tendency to couch his oppressive and exploitative global war as a cause on the side of freedom and democracy. However, it is interesting to examine in terms of tense, given that it posits Afghani freedom and pride as only capable of existing in the future tense and alongside American friendship. The idea that Afghanistan might have once had some measure of freedom and pride, or that such could be developed independent of Western paternalism never occurs to Bush. For Bush, there is a simplistic and base teleology at play: Afghans are oppressed and incapable of self-government; America invades; Afghanistan then gets freedom and democracy. It is a simple story, one easily told again and again, even if it does not have a real-world corollary. As historian Hayden White has written,

> Providing the “meaning” of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told is called explanation by emplotment. If, in the course of narrating his story, the historian provides it with the plot structure of a Tragedy, he has “explained” it in one way; if he has structured it as a Comedy, he has “explained” it in another way. Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind. (7)

For Bush, the history of Afghanistan was not one needing careful study, but one that could be emplotted onto a World-War-II-esque narrative of emancipation. America would free
Afghanistan from those Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, just as it once liberated Europe from the Nazis. That the liberation of Europe required help from the Red Army, which found epic failure in Afghanistan, was merely an inconsequential detail, not part of Bush’s freedom genre. While Bush suffered from a facile sense of what was necessary for “liberating” a nation, his belief that Afghanistan had never had a moment of peace was commonly echoed in Western politics, even among those less sympathetic to his position. In fact, a 2010 Wikileaks release of a communication from current American Vice-President Joe Biden makes this clear: “Vice President Biden described the complex nature of the security problem in Afghanistan, commenting that besides the demography, geography and history of the region, we have a lot going for us” (Elliott). Though Biden does not wear Bush’s rose-colored glasses, he still suffers from the same historical myopia that views Afghanistan in a perpetual tragic tale, one that can only be changed through the presence of a foreign hero from a distant land.

Aside from his theory of emplotment, White also wrote about the tendency to read understandings of the present into the past, noting that

the very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world of social thought and praxis, and to have determined the formal coherence of that past world, implies a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is continuous with the past world. Commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the kinds of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely. (21)
Both Bush and Biden read an image of the disaster in Afghanistan under the Taliban, and, perhaps, the Soviet invasion in the eighties, onto the entire history of the region, without any historical knowledge to do so, conveniently ignoring, as will be discussed in more depth later, the relatively calm forty years of Afghan history in the middle of the twentieth century, when the country was left alone by the British, Soviets, and Americans.

That politicians would ignore historical contexts that undermine their policies is nothing new. But what is noteworthy is the extent to which the British and American culture industries have practiced the same cultural unawareness, not just generally, but consistently eliding the exact same element of Afghan history. Such a pattern denotes not mere ignorance of Afghanistan, as ignorance would occur in uneven and sporadic ways, but a collective buying into the larger narrative of Afghanistan’s essential being, even by those who ostensibly oppose the Bush and Blair Administrations’ policies. In fact, representations of the Bush and Biden elisions and biases can be seen in both Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and the Tricycle Theatre’s *The Great Game: Afghanistan* trilogy. Both theatric works present themselves as historically grounded alternative visions of Afghanistan; however, both end up reaffirming the hegemonic view of Afghanistan as ungovernable within a liberal framework that makes such a viewpoint even more insidious. Given this pattern of elision and bias in theatric works, it is also worth examining director Marc Forster’s film adaptation of Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner*. Aside from the fact that *The Kite Runner* is the most widely viewed and deeply commodified contemporary representation of Afghanistan,\(^1\) it also makes apparent the sexualized and gendered nature in which Afghan oppression is often represented, as well as the forms of Western penetration that are presented as necessary to restructure the sexual and neocolonial

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\(^1\) *Rambo III* would, perhaps, win the indignity of the pre-September 11\(^{th}\) award in this category. In fact, David Sirota has recently argued that many American anti-Muslim sentiments are rooted in the popular culture of the 1980s.
order within a nation deemed unable to govern itself. Additionally, while theatrical representations of the Middle East are not a topic that has been extensively theorized, some parallel work has been done on cinematic representations. Therefore, the cinematic concerns of Lina Khatib and, in particular, Jack G. Shaheen provide a good starting point for considering how Middle Eastern bodies are formulated for popular audiences.

Afghan Land

In the documentary exploration of Hollywood’s stereotypes of Arabs Reel Bad Arabs, author Jack G. Shaheen notes “a dangerously consistent pattern of dangerous Arab stereotypes … that is the given; there is no deviation.” As part of his critique of these stereotypes, he discusses the Hollywood construction of Arabland, “a mythical theme park, and in Arabland, you have the ominous music, you have the desert … we add an oasis, palm trees, a palace that has the torture chamber in the basement, the pasha sits there on his posh cushions with harem maidens surrounding him; none of the harem maidens please him, so they abduct the blonde heroine from the West, who doesn’t want to be seduced.” Stereotypical Hollywood depictions of the Middle East are rooted in films such as The Sheik (1921), where an early intertitle states, “Wives are secured by the wealthy sons of Allah.” A later intertitle explains that these wives risk becoming “slaves” in a harem, ignoring the specific Islamic rules regarding polygamy.2 Even animated films cannot resist such depictions, ranging from Bugs Bunny’s battle with a fat, bearded, scimitar-wielding “Ali Babi” (1957) —the literal representation of the “Ali Baba kit” that Shaheen discusses—to the endless deserts and dancing stereotypes of Disney’s Aladdin (1992).

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2 Essentially, Islam allows men up to four wives, so long as they are economically able to support all of them, and any children, as equals, a dictate dating to a disproportionate number of men and women in tribal Islamic cultures. Interestingly, in the film The Sheik, the first intertitle after the appearance of the title character draws attention to the fact that he is played by Rudolph Valentino, and his character is later revealed to descend from Europeans, lest the Middle East sex fantasy on screen feel to foreign to its audiences, or dip too far into the miscegenation taboo.
As Shaheen notes, “Yesteryears Arab land is today’s Arabland.” However, it is worth noting that modern Arabland presents a different fantasy than the dancing harem girls of Rudolph Valentino’s gaze. In fact, the post-Gulf War fantasia of backwardness that was present in *Aladdin* has been almost entirely replaced by the terrorist war fantasia of backwardness in contemporary films, where Jasmine’s omnipresent navel is replaced by veiled women with no rights and scimitars are replaced by an assortment of guns and bombs in films like *Terms of Engagement* and shows such as *24*. Perhaps most disturbing, though, is the ability of the film *The Kite Runner* to adapt the Arabland fantasia to a non-Arab country, while simultaneously joining the terrorist fantasy of contemporary films to the sex fantasies of older films. Through this construction, the film creates a Western fantasia of Taliban child rape that presents Muslim sexuality as always-already perverse and Muslim nationality as always-already in need of Western military intervention.

*The Kite Runner*, like so many other films, is essentially the tale of the wondrous opportunities for hard-working immigrants in America, as opposed to the oppressive horrors of their homeland, told through a combination of flashbacks and a melodramatic contemporary climax. In chronological order, the narrative relates the idealistic childhood friendship of the upper-class Pashtun Amir and the Hazara son of his father’s servant Hassan. After success in Kabul’s kite flying competition, their friendship is forever changed when another upper-class Pashtun, Assef, rapes Hassan, and Amir, out of shame for not helping his friend, lies to his father about a stolen watch in order to have Hassan’s family removed from the house. Later, Amir and his family flee to America during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, where Amir’s father struggles to make ends meet, Amir falls in love with an Afghani American girl, and Amir publishes his first novel. This causes him to receive a phone call mysteriously asking him to
return to Afghanistan, where he must rescue Hassan’s son (who turns out to be his nephew) from none other than Assef, who is using his seemingly high role in the Taliban as a conduit for continuing to rape children, and who, somehow, retrieved Hassan’s son from an orphanage. Naturally, Amir manages to rescue the boy and return him to America, where the boy finally smiles when he is taken to fly kites with his new Afghani American family. Along the way, Amir’s father curses the Soviets and Amir sees the destruction of his homeland, even witnessing a stoning in a soccer stadium.

All of this is to say that the movie was widely praised in America, particularly for the performance of Iranian actor Homayoun Ershadi as Amir’s father, but also for providing insight into Afghani and Afghani American experiences. For instance, USA Today critic Claudia Puig noted, “The Kite Runner is a compelling and uplifting tale that exposes the viewer to an unfamiliar, fascinating culture and a family dynamic that is recognizable and nuanced” (Puig). Similarly, Roger Ebert wrote that this “magnificent” film “helps us to understand that the newcomers among us come from somewhere and are somebody.” Unsurprisingly, both reviews place the emphasis on Western spectatorship of Afghani experiences. For Puig the importance is not whether the depictions are accurate, historically or culturally, but that they provide her an opportunity to view “an unfamiliar, fascinating culture,” even if through the lens of an American director. Similarly, Ebert seems to assume that the goal of the film should be to help him understand Afghanistan, thereby replicating the power dynamics of not only the Western gaze, but also Western military intervention in Afghanistan.³

³ In fact, about the only criticism was that the film was too boring, as San Francisco Chronicle’s Mick LaSalle pointed out: “The childhood scenes are a slog, and the supposedly dramatic climax is limp and far-fetched. There’s a lethargy and a reverence about this film that seem misplaced, as though Forster and screenwriter David Benioff thought they were adapting a sacred text and forgot they were making drama.”
The problem with this sort of praise, other than the questionable power and privilege dynamics that it replicates, is that the whole reason *The Kite Runner* feels uplifting and understanding is because it is structured around Western fantasies of Muslim experiences, not the actual history of Afghanistan, the kind of iconography that allows Mick LaSalle to write, “The movie’s great virtue is its subject—Afghanistan in transition from a modern secular state into a Soviet war zone and finally, under the Taliban, into a medieval nightmare” (LaSalle). The construction of this fantasy hinges on three primary choices.

First it requires the elision of American and Pakistani involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War, as well as the conjoining of Westernization and sympathy. Thus, we see Amir’s father swear at the Soviets throughout the film for ruining his country, but the audience is never told that the American CIA and Pakistani ISI helped arm the mujahedeen, the Islamic militia that paved the way for the Taliban and al-Qaeda—a detail that even Rambo got right. Through this elision, the child-raping Taliban Other is melded with the Communist Soviet Other in the destruction of the idyllic homeland, represented by the noble, capitalist, educated, music-loving father, who must abandon his wealth when the Soviets arrive, just as the women must later cover themselves when the Taliban comes. There are many problems with this representation—not the least of which is the means by which it unquestionably justifies and joins American military policy in Afghanistan in the eighties and after 9/11 into a noble war for freedom—including the fact that wealth, music, and education aren’t inherent Western values. Most interesting, though, is the reality that the Soviet-linked People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, as part of its socialist agenda, required men to cut their beards; banned the burqa, bride prices, and forced marriages; limited mosques; and promoted literacy programs (Ishiyama). In other words, it was the socialists who promoted the image of “Westernization” that the film supports, while the
American state, to which the protagonist flees, funded the Islamic extremists. This historical fact does not exist in the Afghani fantasy land.\(^4\)

The second part of this fantasy is found in the depiction of women, most notably in the latter third of the film where Amir, upon returning to Kabul, watches the stoning of a woman in a crowded soccer stadium, in which all women present wear burqas. Interestingly, the structure of the scene follows that of a BBC documentary, later aired on CNN,\(^5\) entitled *Beneath the Veil*, in which a burqa-clad woman is shot on the goal line of a soccer stadium in Kabul. A fantasy in and of itself, even conservative Martin Kramer noted in the neoliberal funded *Middle East Quarterly*, “*Beneath the Veil* grabbed viewers’ attention thanks to this shot seen ‘round the world, and Shah did nothing to diminish its impact. Nowhere did she tell viewers what crime the condemned woman had committed (she beat her husband to death with a hammer while he slept). Nor did she say how frequently the Taliban executed women in public (this was the first occurrence since their coming to power three years earlier)” (70). Additionally, the actual documentary leads the viewer to believe that the woman is guilty of a sex crime by earlier making note of the harsh treatment of such crimes under the Taliban regime. None of this stopped *The Kite Runner*’s own gender fantasy. In fact, instead of leaving the audience to assume the woman is being killed because of adultery, it is stated outright, with a, presumably, Taliban leader declaring, “We listen to what God says, and we obey. And what does God say? Every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin…And what manner of punishment befits the adulterer? How shall we punish those who dishonor the sanctity of marriage?” Within seconds, the first stone is thrown, naturally by Assef, because shooting a woman for killing her

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\(^4\) For Ella Taylor, writing in *The Village Voice*, this is precisely why *The Kite Runner* was successful: “Add to all that his tactful tiptoeing around the United States’ role in arming the Taliban in Afghanistan, and you’ve got yourself a runaway American best-seller” (Taylor).

\(^5\) This airing occurred in 2001 in the lead-up to the war in Afghanistan. The film had sat on CNN shelves for two years before 9/11 without anyone showing any interest in it (Slaughter 37).
husband was apparently not violent enough to justify the necessity of either invading Afghanistan or fleeing to America. And, just in case more is needed, the entire crowd, in a stadium that holds twice as many as the one actually in Kabul, cheers “Allah akbar”—God is great—during the stoning.

Just as the film’s viewers are never made to ask how the Taliban came into power because they are supposed to assume it was the Soviets’ fault, they are never encouraged to ask if an event such as the one that is seen in The Kite Runner actually happened—or why all of the women wear burqas and none wear chadors—because they already have been conditioned to know that no force is crueler to women than Islam. As Leila Ahmed writes in Women and Gender in Islam, “[T]he Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society” (152). Naturally, there is a through line from the early colonialist rhetorics that Ahmed details all the way to the images of The Kite Runner that justify a new form of violence against Muslim male bodies, in image, and women and children as well, in reality. As Ty Burr notes, “The movie glances at the real horrors of a theocratic dictatorship—the public stonings, the private power-mongering—but only on the way to soothing a fictional dilemma.” For the makers of The Kite Runner, this involved articulating a clear relationship between the stoning of women and the raping of children, as if one did not deserve condemnation in and of itself. However, there is no time within the film to explore the historical contexts that created the Taliban.

To be clear, there is no historical basis for the melodrama of the Taliban as a conduit for a rich kid’s child raping needs. In fact, one of the origin myths of the Taliban tells of a group of
soldiers having rescued two girls from a militia commander who was raping them, and leaving
that commander strung from his tank’s turret (Cooley 144). And, ironically enough, it would
seem just as likely that the son of privilege would have fought on the side of the militias, while
Hassan, the tough, pious character, would have been more likely to have sided with the Taliban.
But none of this matters in The Kite Runner’s fantasia, where Afghanistan is so backward and
the Taliban so evil that children could be stolen from orphanages to meet the Taliban’s perverse
needs. But in America you can fly a kite and be free, while your country is being bombed by the
truly moral nation. No doubt, this is what caused Salon critic Andrew O’Hehir to write, “It's
only slightly unfair to summarize the movie's uplifting message this way: You got raped by the
Taliban, kid? And your whole country is fucked beyond repair? Fly a kite and you'll feel better!”

Sadly, O’Hehir’s intended hyperbole does not go far enough. The Kite Runner’s actual
message would seem to be even more brutal: Hey kid, you’ve been fucked, just as your country
has been penetrated by invading armies and nutcases who wrecked it. Come to America, as it
penetrates all corners of your country, and fly a kite, and you’ll feel better. It is the ultimate
Middle East paternalistic fantasy of justifying military might to save the women and children
from the worst crimes, and, as such, it exists in a perpetual space of gendered and sexualized
violence, sublimating the transnational economic rape through the use of domestic sexualized
torture. Such representations are not entirely accidental. As discussed in the opening chapter,
the relationship between torture and sexuality are of significant concern in Jasbir K. Puar’s
Terrorist Assemblages. Additionally, Puar explores the relationship between queerness and
terrorism, declaring that “queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the
terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion,
deviance” (xxiv). Puar argues that this is a widespread American conflation:
The depictions of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized at this historical juncture are terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction, and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body—homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease. (xxiii)

For Puar, American culture views the homosexual and the terrorist as parallel threats to the nation, with the former undermining the family order, and the latter posing a threat to the political and economic structures. As such, the revulsion toward the sexual practices of the homosexual can be grafted onto the terrorist—or those deemed terrorist—to make him or her seem an even more revolting outsider, and a threat to families as well as the political structure. *The Kite Runner* represents, perhaps, the purest example of this sort of iconography, creating the Taliban as a syndicate of child rapists that exist outside of history, just as they do in George W. Bush’s formation at the beginning of this chapter, and in need of perpetual Western organization in order to restructure Afghanistan, politically and morally. In this way, it encourages the audience not only to ignore history, but also critical engagement with the present.

In fact, *The Kite Runner* transplants the Arabland fantasy perfectly to Afghanistan, substituting the Taliban for sheiks, an orphanage for a harem, guns and stones for scimitars, and a poor, little boy (whose father went to America) for the poor, Western woman. And because of the decades of fighting within Afghanistan, there is no Afghani film industry to speak of to provide an alternative narrative. As Lina Khatib writes, “We have to understand here that, even as a victim of Other terrorist attacks, the United States remains the stronger side. It is not marginalized; it marginalizes others” (32). Unfortunately, in *The Kie Runner*, the United States, as the stronger side, also exists as the only savior, rather than a party to oppression.
However, in America and Britain, some Western theater artists have attempted to rehistoricize Western engagements in Afghanistan. In fact, both Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and the Tricycle Theatre’s *The Great Game* trilogy work to provide a historical context for the rise of the Taliban and contemporary Afghanistan. Unfortunately, at the same time, they often replicate the structures of Western power and the Western gaze that have traditionally shaped Afghanistan in Western art works such as *The Kite Runner*, thereby risking the perpetuation of the image of Afghanistan as that which is perpetually penetrated, perpetually broken, perpetually queer, and perpetually left lying on the soccer field for whomever may next find pleasure in violence there. In fact, though child rape is removed, both plays continue to elide the middle of the twentieth century from Afghan history, while also gendering images of salvation in narratives that support the broad tone of George W. Bush’s messianic rhetoric, even as they attempt to critique the specific application of Western salvation.

That the two plays chronologically bookend *The Kite Runner* only underscores the prevalence of such iconography and ideology across time and media, as well as the centrality of this particular image of Afghanistan to the perpetuation of Bush and Obama Administration policies.

**Terrorist Tourism**

The fame of Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul*, interestingly, rests almost as much on a historical accident of when it was written as on anything contained in the script itself. As James Reston notes in *American Theater*, when Kushner began work on the script in 1999, few “really cared about the Taliban or Pashtun” (50). However, the lines have resonance largely because of what we witnessed in our newspapers and on television last fall [2001], as one warlord after another switched loyalties
and told outrageous lies, and we gained the distinct impression that in this land
where fundamental Islam was practiced, and where the Department for the
Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice held sway, no one believed in
anything, much less the truth. (30)

Similarly, Robert Brustein declared in *The New Republic* that

Tony Kushner may be the luckiest and the unluckiest dramatist in town. Having
had the foresight to write a play about Afghanistan before the September 11
attacks, he opened it last December, with America’s presence in the area still
dominating the front pages. That was the lucky part. It was also the unlucky part.
The destruction of the World Trade Center and America’s subsequent pursuit of
the Taliban and al Qaeda has radically altered our consciousness about that
country in a way that no prophet could have possibly foreseen. (“Angels” 27)

In this context, *Homebody/Kabul* opened to an unusual amount of attention, given that it
represented both a timely play and the first major work of Kushner’s mounted since *Angels in
America*. However, while *Angels*’ critical reception surpassed many previous AIDS plays, it
entered into a known conversation on homosexuality, AIDS, and American politics—and a
conversation particularly well-known in the theater world, with major New York productions
about AIDS preceding Kushner’s work by at least half a decade. *Homebody*, on the other hand,
was a work receiving major attention in an informational vacuum. In fact, Reston even notes
that he prepared for seeing *Homebody* by watching Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *Kandahar*—the same
film that George W. Bush screened in an effort to better understand the situation in Afghanistan.
The fact that it did not occur to either that Makhmalbaf—a director from Shi’a Iran, which had a
hostile, at best, relationship with the Sunni Taliban—might have his own political biases in how
he shapes modern Afghanistan merely underscores the informational hole that Kushner was encountering.

It would seem that Kushner was well aware of the space in which his play would be performed, given that Homebody begins with a one-hour monologue on Afghan history, told by an elderly British woman who has become fascinated with the culture. The Homebody begins by saying, “‘Our story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000 B.C.’…I am reading from an outdated guidebook about the city of Kabul. In Afghanistan. In the valleys of the Hindu Kush mountains. A guidebook to a city which as we all know, has…undergone change” (Kushner 9). This guidebook, a 1965 construction of Afghanistan as an Orientalist fantasy land, replaces the child rape and stoning fantasies of The Kite Runner, with an endless parade of epic battles and epic mountain heights. As the Homebody says early on,

Our story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000 B.C., when the Aryans, not in armies but in family groups, traveled south from beyond the River Oxus, to cross the Hindu Kush mountains on their way to northern India. This crossing must have made a great impression for, nearly two thousand years later, when the Rigveda, the great hymnic poem of the Aryan peoples, is written down, several verses retain the memory of the serene beauty of the valleys of the Kabul River.

In this way, the Homebody paints an idyllic Afghanistan in the minds of her audience, one that does not have Soviet mines, American Stingray missiles, or Taliban dress codes anywhere on the canvas, in part because she uses a guidebook that predates these events—as well as a stack of other old books on the desk on stage—to shape her own imagination of the country. The extent to which the audience is supposed to read this fantasia ironically or be spellbound by it, however,
is never entirely clear. Certainly, the 1998 setting of the play, which predates not only the 9/11 attacks, but also the destructions of the Buddha statues at Bamiyan, allows Kushner to create a degree of unawareness in his character that would not be dissimilar to his audience’s, as noted above. As Mark Steyn so bluntly puts it, “This is 1998, just after Bill Clinton’s diversionary raid on an empty al-Qaeda camp, when as Mr. Bush drolly put it he fired a $2 million missile at a $10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt” (Steyn 38). The question, for a writer who once espoused his love of Walter Benjamin, becomes whether or not the Homebody’s monologue deconstructs this naïve fantasia of the Other or reifies it within Kushner’s audience. On one hand, one is made aware of the character’s immense naiveté as she declares, “Oh I love the world! I love love love love the world! Having said so much, may I assume most of you will have dismissed me as a simpleton, which may for all its peremptoriness nevertheless be exactly appropriate” (Kushner 12). This is later underscored by the Homebody’s departure on an Afghan tourist adventure to the strains of Frank Sinatra’s own fantasy of the Other, “It’s Nice to Go Trav’ling” (29). Presumably, hearing Sinatra sing of the “camel route to Iraq” and hearing the Persian poet Sa’ib-I-Tabrizi describe “the beautiful city of Kabul” cannot but ring false to a modern audience that imagines Iraq in conjunction with Saddam Hussein and Afghanistan as a land of burqas and Taliban militants. This tension is apparent when Peggy Phelan writes in her review of the Berkeley production of *Homebody*:

> This sense of historical time-lag is crucial to Kushner’s political polemic. To understand anything about the rise of the Taliban, Kushner insists, one needs to think through the extraordinary brutal history of Afghanistan. The monologue places Kabul, a city now so newly near for US audiences, in a vast historical setting that continually displaces and defers the possibility of dramatic or political
resolution. The sometimes maddeningly long sentences of the Homebody bespeak the difficulty of finding a way to reach closure about Kabul. (167)

It would seem that Kushner’s desire at the start, a desire that pre-dated 9/11, was to create a historical context for the rise of the Taliban, one particularly important for American audiences, given their own role in creating the conditions for the Taliban. This is why the Homebody quickly rattles off “the Soviet Union invades, the Mujahideen are armed at first insufficiently, then rather handsomely by the U.S., staggering amounts of firepower, some captured from the Soviets, some purchased, some given by the West, missiles and anti-aircraft cannons…the U.S.S.R. is swept away, and now the Taliban” (Kushner 22). In this way, the American audience is made to face the Taliban as the legacy of American and, not only, Soviet violence in Afghanistan.

At the same time, it is interesting to note—as it will be in The Great Game—the jump in the Homebody’s monologue from 1921 to the Soviet-Afghan War, a common history of Afghanistan that always moves from the removal of the British to the arrival of the Soviets, with little discussion of the events that occurred between. The period in which Afghanistan had stability, remained neutral in the violences of both World War II and the Cold War, developed its infrastructure more, and was a crossroads for hippies traveling between Europe and India is always elided in favor of the history of endless war and brutality that Phelan mentions. However, the actual history is one not of the endless violences of oppressive Muslims preferred by Bush and Biden at the top, but a period of stability book-ended by the violences injected into Afghanistan by outside power. The Kite Runner, may, in fact be right about Afghanistan having been raped, but it has little sense of who perpetrated the crime. Kushner seems to avoid this failing, but also seems to have equally little interest in an Afghanistan that is not being raped.
Additionally, modern Afghanistan only intermittently makes contact with the Homebody’s narrative. Instead, the enthusiasm of her portrayal by Linda Emond in the initial performances powers her fantasy in a way that risks overcoming the desire for deconstructing the Western Afghanistan that Kushner seems to attempt to dismantle through the construction of such an obviously naïve fantasy. In fact, the closest moment to a set piece while the Homebody is on stage, the moment when, twenty minutes into the show, she finally stands, comes not out of protests against any of the violences in Afghan history, whether they be internally or externally created, but, instead when she wants to show off the ten traditional hats she had bought from Afghan refugees in London for three ninety-nine each:

Looking at the hat we imagine not bygone days of magic belief but the suffering behind the craft. This century has taught us to direct our imagination however fleetingly toward the hidden suffering: evil consequence of evil action taken long ago, conjoining with relatively recent wickedness and wickedness perpetuated now, in August 1998, now now now, even as I speak and speak and speak. (Kushner 17).

In this moment, the modern is joined to the ancient, the air strikes ordered by Bill Clinton are seen not as connected to a contemporary society structured as human, but as an inhuman fetishized people whose only value is in what they once were, not what they now are, or might be. Of course, this assumes that the audience even heard the lines at this point. As Framji Minwalla writes, “The Homebody has, at this point in her tale, carefully removed one hat at a time from a shopping bag and placed each on the table next to her. In both productions I saw, the activity elicited scattered ‘oohs’ from the audience, revealing how embedded and automatic Orientalist responses are when predominantly Western audiences confront such exotica” (33).
Video from the original New York and London productions also demonstrates similar reactions, though it would seem that the stage as well as cultural conditioning helped lead to the “automatic Orientalist responses.” After all, the audience had been watching a woman sit on a nearly bare stage and discuss Afghan history before she pulled out the hat. It might not have taken a Western fantasy to elicit excitement at such a moment, though it’s noteworthy that this is how Kushner chose to break the tableau. In fact, what is remarkable about *Homebody/Kabul* is the ease by which Kushner replicates the kind of Orientalist fantasies that he seems to want to break, while also promoting a historical narrative that mirrors the orthodoxy of Washington politicians and *The Kite Runner*. In this moment, the audience is asked not to question the Homebody’s naiveté, but, instead, to join in her fantasy, one that is reified when she quickly turns away from the violence of Clinton’s missile attacks to go back to the ancient history of her guidebook, this time with a hat on her head:

Severe economic crises throughout the region in the second century A.D. made it easy for the Sassanians, a purely Iranian Persian dynasty, to claim the Hindu Kush Valley as a semi-independent satrapy. The inhabitants of Kabul from the Kushano-Sassanian period appear to have remained Buddhist, while their Sassanian overlords were obstreperous worshipers of Zoroaster. (Kushner 18)

And so the play continues, until, forty minutes into the Homebody’s monologue the Taliban is finally mentioned in the passage noted above.

And it is upon the mention of the Taliban that the Homebody finally closes the guidebook, apparently having come upon a story not for tourist tales, but for magic, as she delves into a fantasy of speaking in Pashtu to the Afghan man who sold her the hats, once again shaping modern Afghanistan as still joined to the ancient, and now the fantastical, because surely their
violence, the modern violence tied to the West, cannot be real: “I was with the Mujahideen, and
the Russians did this. I was with the Mujahideen, and an enemy faction of Mujahideen did this.
I was with the Russians, I was known to have assisted the Russians, I did informer’s work for
Babrak Karmal” (23). And then the Homebody runs again from the violence that this moment in
history bespeaks, turning from what the shopkeeper has seen to her own racialized erotic fantasy:

And the scent of the hat merchant takes me by surprise, toasted almonds…We
kiss, his breath is very bitter, he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his
whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand. And there are flocks of
pigeons the nearby villagers keep banded with bronze rings about their legs, and
they are released each afternoon for flight, and there is frequently, in the warmer
months, kite flying to be seen on the heights of Bemaru. (26)

The iconography is that of the Western woman being penetrated by the foreign Other, an erotic
fantasy even older than the books sitting on the Homebody’s desk, and one that displays her as
fetishizing the same sexual submission that is forced onto the boys in *The Kite Runner*. True,
there are multiple substantive differences between a rich, white woman’s sexual fantasies and the
raping of children, but what is remarkable is that two works of seemingly dissimilar political
aims return to the perversity of Afghan encounters that Puar wrote of. However, the reality of
the Homebody’s fantasy is an inversion, another colonialist taking what she desires from a
foreign culture and shaping it into her own fantasy, as inaccurate as that of a novelist rescuing a
child from a fantasy of the Taliban. Or, as Minwalla writes,

The official history written on the brown body—the history of the guidebook—
stuff the post-colonial subject with moral significance in order to contain the
ambivalent terror it evokes. The Homebody’s characteristic solution is to saturate
this unnervingly present body with as many meanings as she can formulate, transforming the merchant into an Afghan Everyman, the archetypal post-colonial refugee. (38)

While it is true that the Homebody grafts multiple fantasies onto the Afghan character, it seems a significant overstatement to assume that she shapes this object of her desire into an Everyman, given how easily her fantasies fit into the tropes of Afghani representation discussed above: she removes the same parts of Afghan history that The Kite Runner, Bush, Biden, and, as will be seen below, The Great Game do, and she also creates the Afghan as a sexualized Other, in the same mode that Puar writes of, given that male Afghan bodies are always already read as terrorist in the West. Of course, the queerness of her fantasy is not in homosexuality, but in the non-normative nature of a married, upper-class British woman who desires sexual fulfillment from an Afghan. In this way, she exercises the colonial privilege of viewing Afghans as little more than sexual playthings, undeserving of a complete history, but merely service to Britain, however it might manifest itself this time. Such a formation efficiently removes Afghan agency and reinscribes the paternalism desired by Bush with his false promise of democratic friendship.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare Homebody/Kabul to The Kite Runner. After all, Kushner at least attempts to provide something resembling a historical context, including a history of Western interventions, which Marc Forster’s film resists at all costs. And if Homebody/Kabul were only the Homebody’s story, this comparison might not be a fair critique, but the Homebody’s monologue is merely the first of the nearly four hours in the theater that shape the play, and the longer the narrative runs, the further and further from history it is carried. In fact, despite being the longer portions of the play, the second narrative is relatively easy to explain: the family of the Homebody go to Kabul to find her after she has disappeared and possibly been
killed; they encounter numerous fascinating Afghan and British characters; the father does drugs; the daughter is threatened; the evils of the Taliban are exposed; and the family escapes back to Britain without the Homebody, but with a new Afghan woman in tow—the rescuing of an Afghan apparently being a new trope in the presentation of Western penetrations of the region, Rambo’s rescuing of his American friend no longer being heroic enough. In this manner, the queerness of miscegenation is joined by the queerness of wife swapping. And in this narrative, Kushner allows the narrative of the oppression of women through which all Afghan sufferings are filtered to subsume any historical contexts he may have established in the opening portion of the play. Remarkably, as noted above, the parallel sexual fantasies of *The Kite Runner* and *Homebody/Kabul* provide for the elision of the exact same moments of Afghan history in order to support the Western paternalistic myth.

Much like other works on Afghanistan, *Homebody/Kabul* exists largely without mentioning the rule of Mohammad Zahir Shah, whose rule Barry Bearak described in his *New York Times* obituary as being “characterized by a lengthy span of rare peace. This tranquility is recalled now by many in the country with immense nostalgia.” Like all governments, Nadir Shah’s rule was not perfect, but it was marked by progressive reforms in women’s rights, worker’s rights, education, and voting. It is also notable for the lack of external war and decreased internal conflict, including a peaceful transition between Zahir Shah’s uncles and Zahir Shar himself, once he was old enough to rule. In fact, even the ascension of Mohammad Daoud Khan to the Presidency of Afghanistan in 1973 occurred in a peaceful coup. Douad Khan and his family would later be executed during the Saur Revolution that brought the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power, but that violence—perpetuated by
Communists—is where the Western narrative always picks up, ignoring the extended period of peace and development that preceded it.

The second scene of the play opens with Priscilla, the Homebody’s daughter, behind a sheet, while a Mullah and a doctor provide Priscilla and her father with a description of the condition of the Homebody’s dead body (31). From this scene, the play moves between the father, Milton, doing various opiates with a drug-addled British diplomat, Quango, and Priscilla exploring the streets of Kabul, and, at different moments, being harassed by Taliban moral police for listening to her mother’s walkman (Sinatra, naturally), not wearing her burqa properly, and carrying Esperanto poetry believed to be secret code for the Northern Alliance. Along the way, Priscilla is told, most notably by Mahala, an Afghani woman who will return to London with Priscilla’s family as, presumably, a replacement wife/mother, about the horrors of the Taliban: “They call themselves mullahs, the ulema, they wrap themselves in the Prophet’s mantle, these refugee-camp gutter rats from Jalalabad, from Kandahar, but they sell drugs and murder children and bribe their enemies to give them victories” (84). After a translation for Priscilla (or the audience), she continues, “The CIA sends these bastards funding through Pakistan, where the military high command, it’s all Pashtuni-wallahs, these madmen and terrorists, they’ll turn on their masters sooner or later, and still the U.S. pays them money and sends them guns” (84). The most famous part of this section then comes when Mahala finally declares, “You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don’t worry, they’re coming to New York!” (85). It is in this moment that the ancient past of the Homebody’s narrative is meant to be joined to the more recent past of the setting of the play and the post-9/11 context of the play’s staging in which al-Qaeda, a guest of the Taliban’s, had finally come to New York. However, Priscilla’s rejoinder—“I’m English”—steers the conversation into a discussion of the relationship between
the British and American states, rather than the American and Afghani ones (85). Additionally, the exclamation is buried in the middle of a narrative that begins with the exposure to Afghan horrors and ends, much like Angels in America, with the construction of an alternative family, this time back in London. And the ending, instead, moves toward a statement not just of the violence of the Taliban, but also the risks of the Northern Alliance. “I am lying, you think,” Mahala tells Priscilla, “I loathe the Taliban, they are my own people but I loathe them. You think I have lied to help bring from Afghanistan the poetry of Mr. Mondanabosh, which are not hymns of peace in dream language of universal brotherhood but military information for the Northern Alliance.” Upon hearing this, Priscilla states simply, “Who sound as dreadful, really, as the Taliban.” Mahala simply replies, “We hope not so. Better for women, not as God-crazy. Not agents of Pakistan. On the other hand, Massoud, Rabbani are Tajiks, not Pashtun, so will the Afghans follow them? ... Or will Afghanistan without the Taliban sink again into unending civil war, with missiles supplied from the West? In Afghanistan, Priscilla, the choices are frequently narrow” (Kushner 138).

In the pre-9/11 context in which Kushner wrote his script, this passage, like the one about the Taliban coming to New York, might have played as an insightful examination of a part of the world that the United States had forgotten its responsibility to and for. However, after 9/11, this returns the play to a statement of the perpetual brutality of Afghan history, thereby standing less as a critique of the abandonment of Western responsibilities and more as a justification of the necessity of bombing the heathen Others into peace. It becomes another variation on another British tale, that of the “white man’s burden,” in which (neo)colonial/neoconservative force is...
necessary for the construction of a peaceful world. It just happens that in the modern world, the
British “white man’s burden,” or white woman’s sexual fantasy, for that matter, exists in service
of the American state, rather than the Crown, much as the original Kipling poem was dedicated
to Theodore Roosevelt, rather than the British monarchy. As Phelan notes at the end of her
review: “[T]o place the United States as prime-mover everywhere and forever is to fall into the
trap of considering it as it prefers to be considered: as only and forever the super-power. This
falsifies the history of the world. Therefore, despite Kushner’s best intention, the agonizing
drama of Afghanistan is not yet staged in Homebody/Kabul” (Phelan 168). Similarly, it is easy
to recall what Howard Zinn once wrote of hope:

   To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact
   that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion,
sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex
history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity
to do something. If we remember those times and places--and there are so many--
where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at
least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.
(“Optimism”)

As noted previously, the portion of Afghan history where external powers were not invading is
elided from Kushner’s history, creating another image of Afghanistan not only as perpetually
violated, but in need of another, cleansing penetration, the kind that exists more commonly in the
racial fantasies of British tourists than in the realities of human history. Despite Kushner’s
attempts to write a long history of Afghanistan, his work moves previous little distance from
either *The Kite Runner* or George W. Bush. But he would not be the last to attempt to tell the story of Afghan history on stage.

**Staging the Colonial Legacy**

If *Homebody/Kabul* represents a work subsumed by the moment of its public presentation, the Tricycle Theatre’s 2009 production of *The Great Game* presents the opposite construction of political theater, wherein the historical moment necessitated the construction of a work about Afghanistan. With the election of Barack Obama in America, and his promise to escalate the war in Afghanistan, the faltering presence of Gordon Brown and the Labour Party in Britain, along with increased British casualties in Afghanistan, and a surge in the Taliban’s violence in Afghanistan, the world’s attention seemed to, as it intermittently does, be turning back to Afghanistan, this time from the tempting distractions that Iraq had presented. Thus, Tricycle Artistic Director Nicholas Kent commissioned twelve plays from twelve playwrights dealing with moments in Afghan history since the nineteenth century, when Britain and Russia competed in a Great Game over the control of central Asia and the colonial plunder available there—or, more accurately, transport routes for colonial plunder. Spread out over three nights of performances—dealing with the period of British involvement and aftermath, the Soviet-Afghan War and aftermath, and the current war—or three shows during each weekend day, the performances also included monologues by Siba Shakib and Richard Norton-Taylor, and were joined with a series of lectures, films, and performances of a short play by Naomi Wallace* in a two-month exploration of Afghan history and culture. Notable not merely for the breadth of the engagement, which stands in line with the Tricycle’s history of political and community

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*Wallace’s play *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East* will be discussed in the final chapter, which focuses on how her work has been performed and received in all three sites under discussion in this study.*
involvements—as well as the flexibility that comes from not having a set season—the work also stands at a point of tension between the desire to create a context for the contemporary events in Afghanistan that resists simplistic narratives and the inability to view Afghanistan except as a land for Western interventions and failed ambitions, stretching from colonialists to educational NGOs.

The strength of the work comes through the use of multiple playwrights spanning a century and a half of history, which allows *The Great Game* to resist both the simplistic, single-cause good guys and bad guys of *The Kite Runner*, and the reductive narrative that boils down the reign of the Taliban into a single tale of family reunification, as Kushner does. At the same time, *The Great Game*’s Afghan history, like the works above, also ignores the period between 1930 and 1979, once again resisting the presentation of a stable and developing Afghanistan, and, instead, presenting the history of the country as a steady march of wars and attempts to propel invaders, this thirty years after Zinn warned about “the telling of history from the standpoint of the conquerors and leaders of Western civilization” (*People’s* 22).

There are multiple ways in which—and, perhaps, a book in and of itself on how—to approach *The Great Game*, but in relation to the other works under discussion, it is the sense of always needing to tell the story of Afghanistan from a Western perspective that creates an intriguing example of how emplotment and genre define perception. In fact, within *The Great Game*, even character does not override the genre of Afghanistan as a nation in perpetual need of liberation from itself and others, as, even when Afghan leaders are onstage, it is always their relationship to the political struggles of the West, and occasionally, the Soviets that is of primary concern. The story is set even before an Afghani character is given a chance to speak, and, in this way, *The Great Game* too often bows to the political order it intends to interrogate.
For example, one of the most interesting segments is the play *Durand’s Line* by Ron Hutchinson, wherein the Foreign Minister of British India Sir Henry Mortimer Durand attempts to convince Amir of Afghanistan Abdur Rahman to sign off on a map of Afghanistan, which is to say that the narrative functions like Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* unfurled onstage. Historically, the Durand Line refers to the disputed boundary between what would become Pakistan and Afghanistan, which divided the majority of Pashtuns between the two countries, thereby creating the historical dilemma that is still seen in the fighting by militants on both sides of the line. Thus, early in the play, Rahman and Durand discuss the construction of Afghanistan from tribal lands to create a buffer between the British and Russians:

DURAND: You don’t want the Russians here anymore than we do, Amir.
They’re a threat to you as well as to us.
RAHMAN: And you would rather fight them here than across the mountains. On our territory instead of yours.
DURAND: We won’t have to fight them if we can establish you as a sovereign and stable country between them and us.
RAHMAN: Which makes us what? An ear of grain between two millstones?
DURAND: Waziristan and the Pushtuns are in the wrong place, we can all see that. In some ways, your entire country is.
RAHMAN: How thoughtless of Providence to put us in the wrong place.
…
DURAND: You seem to think, Amir, that a map has no physical reality beyond what it’s drawn on. But take my country—

*He grabs a pen and draws on a piece of paper*—
Scotland—Wales—England

RAHMAN: I have heard of these tribes.

DURAND: More than tribes. Nations. Comprised of men who know that one side of the line they are one thing—native, at home—on the other—other. I daresay we began much as you and the Waziris did, feeling we had loyalty only to the tribe. Over the years we understood we were something larger.

RAHMAN: The map told you?

DURAND: To look at one is to give shape to the world; to put one outside of oneself; from which comes wisdom. (Hutchinson 34-5)

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). He goes on to explain that the nation is imagined because people have to project a simultaneous national experience on those who live in parts of the nation they will never see. It is limited in that all nations are bordered by other nations, and the idea of infinite expansion is, by definition, antithetical to the existence of nations. Sovereignty refers to its own ability to govern unitarily regardless of composition, and a community because the people must imagine their togetherness across difference (6-7). As Anderson writes, “Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7).

This belief in the lines on a map overriding individual or subnational loyalties, no doubt, is where Durand is at ideologically, after only about one hundred years of the nation state’s existence (and with a convenient elision of Ireland from the “tribes” under discussion), as he discusses men who understand what it means to be on one side of a line and how maps shape the
world. However, that worldview was not—and to a certain extent is not—a part of Afghanistan, as Rahman tries to explain. There was no reason to believe that dividing the Pashtuns and pushing groups of people whose tribes had historically opposed one another together into a country, one whose borders were set to meet British goals to protect its routes to India, would create any sort of sovereign community, imagined or otherwise. The scene, then, hinges on the conflict between a theoretical concept that had been literalized for Durand and that could not be so easily applied in Afghanistan. As Rahman tells Durand,

> There is your map. Take good care of it. The lines on it may be imaginary but the problems they cause only too real. You will be fighting because of them for many years…The fact is that you are from a very small country which needs firm borders to stop you and your neighbours being forever at each other’s throats. To impose such a thing on a land as vast as this, which has never had them, is to invite endless trouble. (Hutchinson 39)

Rahman understands what Durand cannot—that the shape of a line on a map does not always match the shape of geography which does not always match the shape of people’s loyalties—as he tells Durand: “I beg you not to try to force the world into a shape it cannot take” (41).

From the vantage point of over one hundred years later, the cost of these forced shapes is clear to those watching, whether it be the case of the Pashtuns stranded between two countries, the Palestinians left without a country, or the Kashmiris, also stranded between two countries, to name a few, all divided and left behind on the maps that Britain drew. This leaves a sense of guilt, for understanding the roots of many contemporary problems, but, at the same time, in creating the sense that Britain is ultimately responsible, that drawing the map in and of itself left Afghanistan destined for ruin, the work also infantilizes the people of Afghanistan. It recreates
the iconography, if less brutally and more sympathetically, of Afghanistan once again as a place perpetually penetrated by others, perpetually incapable of shaping its own future. Thus, Durand tells Rahman near the end of the play,

The world’s been mapped, all of it, defined, parcelled out, even the odd bits and ends snapped up. This is the biggest odd and end left. Your country, I firmly believe, is in the wrong place but there’s nothing can be done about that. What we can do is tidy it up a little; make sure it’s known where it begins and ends, a country should be a country, after all—not a question mark. (48)

Of course, one would expect this degree of paternalism and self-righteousness in a colonialist officer—paternalism and self-righteousness are the nature of colonialism after all. However, this sensibility runs forward through the trilogy.

In J.T. Rogers’ *Blood and Guts*, though, it takes the form of a series of meetings between an American intelligence agent, Jim, and Abdullah, a leader of one group of mujahideen that the United States is helping to arm. Early on, Jim is seen telling Abdullah, “This will be a monthly payment. Whatever you do with it, you do not tell me. Anything you get from us does not come from us. You and I have not met. This meeting never happened” (106). Once again, from the perspective of hindsight, the problem of giving money to the mujahideen without asking how it would be spent seems obvious, but, at the start of the play, Jim is naïve, thinking he will only briefly be involved in Afghanistan and wanting merely to maintain cover for the American involvement. In fact, he also does not worry much when Saaid, Abdullah’s son, tells him of a stronger militia: “Hekmatyar is worse than our mullahs. Only Afghans who believe as he are pure. Only they are true Islam,” continuing later, “It is the same thing! You support the ISI, they support Hekmatyar. You give new weapons to the ISI, they give them / to Hekmatyar”
As with Durand before him, though, Jim is more determined to sell his position and accomplish his goal than to actually learn the specifics of the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan or to hear advice about the different groups that are being armed, and, to the extent that he is sympathetic, he is perpetually stopped by forces above him, as he later tells Abdullah about the closing of the American embassy in Kabul: “I’m not involved with that. You think I didn’t yell and scream? You think I didn’t fight for at least a presence here? We owe you. I know that. But they’re not my people. It’s not my decision” (118). This runs sharply against what Saaid told Jim earlier in the play, yelling, “You are America, you always have a choice!” (114). The extent to which this is true is debatable, but the play unfolds as if it were true, with an offstage American government always choosing who and how much to arm … at least until Jim finally asks Abdullah for the weapons back after the Soviets leave, to which he is told, “I will keep all my weapons.” As Jim stares at him, Abdullah explains further, “We are not done with our struggles, Jim. Najibullah. This takfir [unbeliever] ruling from Kabul. This Shuravi [Soviet] puppet. He is their ‘gift’ to us as they flee with their tails between their legs. After they leave, he must be dealt with” (120). After a brief discussion, Abdullah explains the change that has come over him from his time of critiquing the mullahs at the play’s start, conveying to Jim, “I see now I was wrong, Jim. The Shuravi are going but we are still corrupt here. We have flooded our land with blood and carnage but still there is wickedness. We are a wound that must be cleansed. Only Islam can purify us. A true Islam. Together with my brother, we can do this” (121). This builds to the play’s closing, in which Abdullah tells Jim, “Hekmatyar’s forces, my forces, now they are one. Together we will forge the new. There will be more sons, more martyrs, and, Insa’Allah, more victories. First we will cleanse our country. And then, we will cross oceans.” He then turns to Jim and delivers the play’s final line, “Allah Akbar” (121).
This is one of the few moments of Afghani choice impacting global events that is ever seen, but, even here, it remains the by-product of Western foreign policy, the logical endpoint of having imported so many weapons into a culture so susceptible to fundamentalism. The idea that Afghanistan could actually have peaceful Afghani governance never occurs. Granted, there is a historical record to support Rogers’ representation of events, and, unlike many works, it actually puts a face to the arming of the mujahideen, a process that even Charlie Wilson’s War watered down (and whose error it forecasted from the view of Washington, not Afghanistan). Likewise, the play does, at least, show the folly somewhat equally through Afghan eyes.8 But it still displays Afghanistan as that which is always subject to the will of outside forces, especially because the trilogy as a whole elides any points in Afghan history when those influences were more muted. As Hayden White might note, the narrativization of the past also helps to create the terms by which we tell stories of the present, and this teleology of Afghanistan as always-already subjected to external forces impedes the possibility of imagining an Afghanistan without occupation.

The third part of the trilogy concerns itself not with the specific conditions of Afghans after the American invasion, but, in three of the four plays, with the conditions of NGO workers in Afghanistan, though one of them does at least have an Afghan NGO worker. The most reflexive play of these comes from Richard Bean, who, at the time The Great Game was on stage, was part of a debate at the National, over whether his play England People Very Nice was challenging racial stereotypes or plain racist (or simply boring, which is often most offensive to critics).9 On the Side of Angels shares with England People Very Nice the same desire to explore

8 It seems fair to question to what extent a largely white audience can ever view a narrative through Afghan eyes when a white character is on stage.
9 Writing in The Independent, Michael Coveney noted, “In the end, his panoramic quasi-Brechtian epic is both child-like and childish, exploiting superficial characteristics of Irish, Jews and Asians in the wider cause of asserting
complex issues through comedy, such as when NGO-worker Jackie, early in the play (while discussing funding requests for her organization), explains, “That’s a requisition for an exercise bike. It’s not safe to jog, now, and my bum is beginning to look big even in a burkha” (217). While this is intended to be funny and to create a sense of the distance from home, in a play about the dilemmas of cultural translation faced by NGOs—following a debate over how to represent to donors a girl attending an Afghan school, and spoken by a character who will end up dead by the end of the play (an event marked by staffers unwrapping the exercise bike)—the comment also seems rather horrific, a line clearly meant more for the audience’s perceived sensibilities than for the character. This is a sensibility reified often throughout the play, which hinges on a NGO arranging a bartering session, in which teenage brides are exchanged for irrigation to poppy fields in order to keep Afghans from dying, which Jackie justifies, saying, Graham [another worker who does not approve of the arranged marriages], it’s alright. Tomorrow broker a meeting between the Rohullah and Dawood. Take the decision from that meeting and get it confirmed at the shura. Make him go to the shura. Stay on for the week if you have to, do what it takes. If we don’t get a deal, we’ve got a hundred starving Afghans, and possibly violence. Anything so we have a deal, the only deal I won’t tolerate is Dawood forcing the Rohullah to grow the poppy. (222)

This all leads to a final debate between Graham and Jackie over cultural values/relativism:

JACKIE: Graham, I think you have mistaken my pragmatism for some kind of moral vacuum. Before I leave my apartment to come to work, I put my values in the fridge so to speak. I have not gone native. I am not Kurtz.

that all new arrivals are resented by their immediate predecessors. Nicholas Hytner’s lively, often disgracefully enjoyable production conspires in this purpose to an alarming degree.”

195
JALALUDDIN: What have I done wrong?

GRAHAM stands and looks as if he is preparing to leave

JACKIE: Graham! Listen! You know perfectly well that there’s no such thing as right and wrong in our business, there’s only culture. It’s not our job to impose our values. You’ve put your mother in an old people’s home.

GRAHAM: What’s my fucking mother got to do with anything?

JACKIE: Have you seen anyone homeless in Afghanistan, any old people abandoned? You judge them, let them judge you. You think they treat women badly, they would not even believe that a human being could sink so low, could be so vile as to abandon their own mother, ill as she is, in a local authority facility, and leave the country.

On an intellectual level, the idea of how NGOs communicate between cultures is an interesting question, though one explored at depth in Matt Charman’s The Observer the same summer, but it stands as a theoretical construct in the On the Other Side of Angels, where the actual Afghan girl—and most other Afghans other than Jalaluddin—are not present, thereby once again replicating the idea of Afghanistan as a nation to be acted upon by outsiders without any specific knowledge, rather than a nation that can act for itself. And the play takes this approach to its logical conclusion by having the characters killed when Grant goes off to intervene, and Jalaluddin and Jackie follow behind. After all, the natural price for attempting to cross the line of moral relativism or to stop primitive practices in a backward nation is death.

Part of this, undoubtedly, stems from the lack of Afghan writers in the production, as Susannah Clapp explains:
The hole in this adventurous project is the lack of writing from Afghanistan itself. Kent has explained that he started off by doing ‘a trawl for writers, including novelists, from the subcontinent’ but that, apart from the Iranian-born Siba Shakib, who works in Afghanistan and whose work is featured, he didn’t come up with much. It’s a huge pity. And it’s peculiar. After all, it’s not, contrary to what might be expected, that the country lacks a theatrical tradition. Theatre, being cheap and mobile—needing neither electricity nor literacy—existed in the Afghanistan of the 1970s, when policemen and firemen had their own stage groups, and even now there is a Kabul Theatre Festival. So where are the writers holed up? (Clapp).

Presumably, finding a random Afghan playwright in London might not be the easiest challenge to overcome either, though perhaps part of the difficulty is only looking within London itself. Additionally, it seems natural that the en routes to Afghan history for a Western audience would be through a Western character, and Britons have plenty of colonial guilt to work through in the telling of that story from that perspective, as the unfolding of the play clearly demonstrates. However, the perpetual need to return to that perspective, to assume that history must be told from the colonial eyes, whether they be original colonialists, military imperialists, or NGOs who do not understand the local population, always reduces Afghanistan to a country to be entered and left, violated and discarded, aided to the point of self-gratification, then left behind, returned to its solid centuries of barbarism, as if liberal paternalism is somehow more noble than neocolonial paternalism. Afghan history simply can never stand in and of itself, never be told from the Afghan perspective alone despite the fact that appropriated histories perpetually fail to represent the nation with any degree of integrity.
Meanwhile, the critics found *The Great Game* a perfect way to learn Afghan history. Michael Billington wrote, “One [success] is that they [the plays in the trilogy] fulfill a basic function of art by instructing delightfully. The other is that, rather than pursuing an editorial line, they give us the information to allow us to make up our own minds about Afghanistan’s future,” and “it gives us an historical context in which to discuss the issues.” Similarly, Michael Coveney writes, “It’s a wonderful theatrical presentation of a terrible story,” while Charles Spencer refers to the Afghanistan he knows from the plays as “this perpetually blood-soaked country” and declares, “I learnt a lot.” In some ways, it’s fair that the critics would feel that they learned much from the plays—though the fact that they didn’t know the basics of Afghan history eight years after 9/11 is rather disappointing. There is a lot of information, historical figures, and dates and places in the play to create a basic, if biased and “blood-soaked” timeline. However, the idea that they would trust an artistic representation in and of itself is somewhat horrifying, only mitigated by the fact that the program for each show at least contained a list of recommended reading for those enterprising audience members who realized the play should stand as a start of learning and not an education in and of itself. However, to the extent that the play was used as absolute history, it remains another Afghan fantasy of endless bloodshed for Western eyes, the opposite of what Howard Zinn recommended in his famous opening chapter to *A People’s History of the United States*:

>[T]o think that history-writing must aim simply to recapitulate the failures that dominate the past is to make historians collaborators in an endless cycle of defeat. If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to
resist, to join together, occasionally to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past’s fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare. (11)

Years later, it is not surprising that our solid centuries of warfare continue marching forward through this century, particularly anytime Afghanistan is either staged or filmed. After all, the makers of history, just as the makers of culture and politics and war, still profit from sharing the same narrative and emplotting the same myth. It is a pattern that, tellingly, can also be found in the topic of the next chapter: representations of Iraq.
As noted in the introduction, the “terrorist” has been constructed as the extreme of modern evil in a manner designed to regulate the nation state’s economic and political order and to excise all that might challenge this. However, as this ideology developed, there was still a question of what to do with those nations whose official governments challenged Western dominance and order. For this, the concept of “rogue state” was invented, wherein a nation does not succumb to Western hegemony and, therefore, is now aligned with the terrorist order. And no state better exemplified this for the Bush Administration than modern Iraq. For them, Saddam Hussein became a supporter of terrorism, a holder of WMDs, a threat to his neighbors, and an exemplar of the term between terrorist and national: the leader of a “rogue state,” thereby forfeiting Iraq’s right to exist as an independent state, oil holdings to be turned over upon forfeiture. ¹ And through this, the mythical violent Iraq—what Nicholas Mirzoeff describes as Babylon as “a metaphor for complexity, exile, decadence that has resonated throughout Western modernity as well as the site of a series of historical and mythical experiences”—became a justification for the reregulation of state structures and the reapplication of Western interests—the standard definition of nation and human—within Iraq (4). Mirzoeff also notes, “In the second Gulf War, more images were created to less effect than at any other period in human history” (67), adding, “This distance between image and perceived reality is the signature of the irony that has dominated Western mass media imagery for the past decade” (69). In his work,

¹ Ironically, one of the arguments made to justify the invasion of Iraq was Hussein’s American-funded gassing of the subnational Kurdish population. That the leaders of the two main Kurdish militant organizations are now the President of Iraq and the President of the Kurdish Regional Government merely underscores that acquiescence to the neoliberal order is the only means to lose the terrorist designation.
Mirzoeff consistently returns to the same concern about how violence is staged on stage and in the world, and to what extent such stagings normalize both the modes of violence and their representation. Writing a decade before, Anthony Kubiak, as was discussed in the introduction, found the same concern between spectacle and violence on stage, noting the tension between theatre that represses terror by displacing it into the reforming sign system of terrorism, and theatre that direct thought back to the unrepresentability of terror—the difference between theatre, once again, and its double. The issue finally, is not merely to determine a given theatrical performance’s relation to signification, but also to determine the ways in which that relation mystifies the linkages between signification, theatre, and political violence. These linkages are the traces, as it were, of the mind’s terror upon itself. (11)

The question that Kubiak raises is the right one: how does theater work to replicate or challenge the symbolic system that allows for the continuation of political violence. Still, it would seem worth asking how the mind accepts the perpetuation of political violence, rather than assuming that the markers of that violence are a means by which to assume the mind imposes terror upon itself, a move, once again, easier to make when the concept of “terror” is divorced from its historical contexts. Oddly enough, this erasure leads him to a more complex concern for the possibility of similar erasures on stage. For Kubiak, the fear is that staged acts of violence turn the audience away from actual acts of violence in the world around them, causing them to be horrified by spectacle, rather than actual violence. It is possible for the dramatic representation of suffering to both decontextualize and obscure the historical suffering that those dramatic representations mean to engage. In this way, performance can become a mask for historical and economic violence, a diversion from the world, even as it attempts to engage the world. This is
also the concern that Wendy Hesford makes note of when she writes, of a display of Abu Ghraib images, “The torture images place not only the victim and perpetrator, but also the victim and witness (viewer), in a hierarchical relation” (33).

When taken into account with Mirzoeff and the trajectory of deployments of “terrorism,” what remains are two essential questions. First, to what extent do dramatic representations of Iraqis on non-Iraqi stages attempt to complicate the iconography of Iraqis as always-already terrorists? Second, to what extent do these representations create Iraqis as active participants and to what extent do they replicate iconography of Iraqis as perpetual victims? In the British play Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom,’ the American Aftermath, and the Iraqi Baghdadi Bath the discourse of the “war on terror” is deconstructed, showing Iraqis as the victims of state-sponsored terror campaigns, rather than as terrorists who “hate freedom.” At the same time, in this critique of state agency, they too often move from one horror to the next, sacrificing individual humanity for a narrative of suffering without (possible?) end, an iconography at last undercut in the Iraqi play (Sub Zero), which attempts to provide its characters with a possibility apart from and beyond American occupation.

The Perpetual Prison

Guantanamo, naturally, is not a play about Iraq alone. Instead, it used information collected from interviews with family members of those held in the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and British citizens released from the facility, as well as letters from those still detained, to construct an alternative story of the illegal detainments carried out by the Bush Administration to that given in Donald Rumsfeld’s famous “sunny Cuba” formation. Originally performed in

2 It’s worth noting that international law—if not always international artistic representations—provides for the right to resist occupation, and, thereby, the right to challenge the American state and its attempt to portray all its acts as just.
May 2004, shortly after the first British detainees in Guantanamo were released, and well before the reporting in books such as *The Dark Side* and articles such as Scott Horton’s recent investigation into Guantanamo suicides, the play served as an early intervention in the debate over extradition, detainment, and torture.³

This context also made the use of sources in a documentary theater work somewhat complicated, given the secretive nature of the detention facility, and the fact that the avalanche of whistle blowers had not yet begun descending. And this documentary struggle has traditionally been the context in which Guantanamo has been discussed. For example, Ben Brantley writes, “A sense of a shadowy world of shifting boundaries and rules appropriately pervades the first half of the play, which is largely devoted to accounts of how three of the men initially came to be arrested.” Similarly, writing in The Independent, Raymond Whitaker notes, “Given the material, there is no need for histrionic acting. The facts literally speak for themselves. What struck me, at the end of an evening which left one stirred, questioning, and with a sense that one could no longer seek refuge in ignorance, was that this was what Bertolt Brecht was trying to achieve with his theories of theatrical alienation. If Brecht was alive today, here is the kind of play he would write.”⁴ In a more detailed discussion in *The Drama Review*, Wendy S. Hesford takes this a step further, arguing, *Guantanamo* seeks to counter the spectacle and to humanize the detainees by providing a documentary stage for their stories. *Guantanamo* removes the spectacular hood and attempts to contrast the construction of detainees as pathological. Although the play is structured by humanitarian appeals, it is not

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³ In fact, although hardly a representative sample, when I taught this play in the spring of 2005, it was the first many of my students had heard about the detainment facility.

⁴ As far as I can tell, every play that uses interviews and has been widely viewed has been described as Brechtian by someone, whether alienation effects are truly used or not.
premised on the savage-victim-savior metaphor as it applies to the ‘other.’

Rather, one might argue that in Guantanamo, the U.S. administration and coalition forces are construed as savages, and international human rights law as the savior. (35)

Of course, the challenge here, to be discussed below, is that, while human rights law becomes a means of freeing individuals from Guantanamo, as noted previously, human rights discourses are a means of normalizing Western structures, just like the discourse of terrorism that put the prisoners in Guantanamo in the first place. In freedom or captivity, they are always already interpolated. As noted in the second chapter, this is the central argument of Joseph R. Slaughter’s comparison between human rights laws and the Bildungsroman in Human Rights, Inc., which concludes with an important declaration:

Recognizing the sociohistorical alliance between the Bildungsroman and human rights as mutually enabling fictions that institutionalize and naturalize the terms of incorporation in (and exclusion from) an imagined community of readers and rights holders means also recognizing that our reading acts have implications not only for the imagination but the legislation of an international human rights community; they partly determine the discursive parameters within which and imaginative patterns with which, a human rights international might be realized. That is, the texts we read—and how we read, teach, speak, and write about them—have an effect (however unpredictable) on the possibility that the projection of a world based on human rights might become legible, articulable, and, perhaps, even commonsensical. (328)

5 The natural caveat here being that the play only focuses on British detainees, thereby complicating the westernizing critique, though there is no particular reason why “Western” values need to be either normative or homogenous even in the West.
*Guantanamo*, a documentary play about extradition, imprisonment, and torture, hardly represents a *Bildungsroman*, but, as Slaughter indicates, it does represent a work that asks us to conceive of human beings and what rights should be afforded them more expansively and in contradiction to prevailing British and American state policies. Thus, in its portrayals, and as an early intervention, it does, as Slaughter suggests, attempt to define what human bodies deserve intervention and pity, as well as how we might conceive of those tortured, Other bodies and our relationship to them.

What hasn’t been widely noted is that, coming a year after the invasion of Iraq, the representation of British Iraqi Bisher al-Rawi became one of the earliest stage representations of Iraqi voices in British responses to the current war in Iraq.⁶ Therefore, his image as captive, even before the war in Iraq, becomes part of a structure in which Iraqis are perpetual victims. As such, it is not surprising that when Bisher’s brother,⁷ Wahab al-Rawi, first speaks, it is not of Guantanamo, but of the previous sufferings in Iraq:

> I came into the UK in ’83. [My brother Bisher], come one year later. In the early 80’s, my father was arrested—the Iraq secret service went to his office and arrested him and they took him and he disappeared for eight months. And when we found out where he was, then he was moved from one secret service to another, and he disappeared again. Eventually, we found him and we used some influence at that time to just get him to go to trial. Of course he was tortured and he was abused. A year and a half he spent with the Iraqi secret service which is one of the worst in the world. Finally he went to trial. The judge found him

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⁶ Around the same time in the United States, Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* explored the condition of Iraqi women. However, as Raffo is an Iraqi American, her work will be discussed in a later chapter on diasporic works in Britain and the U.S.

⁷ At the time the play was first performed, Bisher remained in Guantanamo, thus only able to be represented on stage through his redacted letters.
innocent and he was released, but by then the Government has confiscated a lot of his properties and so we decided to leave Iraq for the UK. (6-7)

On one hand, this is a standard trope in idyllic representations of immigrant experiences in multiple countries: the homeland as the land of violence and despair that must be fled, and the new nation as the land of freedom and opportunity. However, this concept is undercut in Wahab’s next line, where he states, “None of us ever asked for asylum. We were very well off at the time” (7). That having been said, Bisher is quickly returned to the image of the idyllic immigrant experience, after Wahab continues, “I went to study my A-levels in Shrewsburty and he went to Millfield College to finish his GCSEs and then do his A-levels” (7). It seems natural that such a depiction would be painted of someone still being held in Guantanamo, given the desire to portray him as “typically” British and not deserving of his punishment. But the point is that one must be typically British in order to elicit sympathy. The human rights violations are not horrific out-of-hand, but only when they are applied by those who fulfill the Western construct for being “human,” which is never defined as “Iraqi.” Judith Butler notes in Frames of War that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended,” continuing to explain that “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated” (1). Given this stratification of which lives are apprehended and valued, the earlier move to a common representation of the modern Iraqi experience, regardless of which country the representation is coming from, as an endless series of sufferings, as being that which is below human, below British, must be balanced by portraying the “British” elements of Bisher if sympathy is to be elicited from the audience. Not only must he be apprehended, but apprehended as human, i.e. British.

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8 This was also the exact frame used in The Kite Runner, discussed in the previous chapter.
The problem in Bisher’s case is that his biography moves out of the “typically” British frame rather quickly, which is what, alongside oppressive and ignorant American foreign policy, caused him to be picked up and taken to Guantanamo in the first place. Essentially, he and his brother had traveled to Gambia in order to develop a mobile peanut oil processing plant. Wahab had gone ahead of the other partners, and, although questioned on his way out of Britain about why he was going to Gambia and what mosque he attended, arrived relatively without incident (Brittain and Slovo 8-11). Bisher, however, had quite a different experience, having been visited by the special branch; then, as his lawyer Gareth Peirce explains in the play, “Two days later they get to Gatwick and they’re all taken off, away from embarking on the plane, their luggage searched, held on a completely false pretext for two or three days, said that there was a suspect item in their luggage, which turned out to be a battery charger” (14). While they were allowed to fly, they were then “immediately arrested” in Gambia, and later interrogated by the Gambians and Americans (14-5). Inevitably, they were asked about the Taliban, about Abu Qatada—a Jordanian national who has been in and out of British prisons for suspected al-Qaeda ties ever since 9/11—about al-Qaeda, and about whether or not their factory equipment was really intended to build an al-Qaeda training camp in Gambia. As Wahab explains,

At the next meeting they brought another theory. We were supposed to come to the Gambia to blow up something. So I told him OK, name two targets in the Gambia that are worth blowing up and he could only name one—the American Embassy. There aren’t any targets in the Gambia. Point one. Point two is: if I was coming over to blow up something, why would I come through the airport you have two hundred miles of porous borders—no police, no nothing—I could have easily slipped through these borders. Third, where is the equipment that I
was supposed to use to blow up anything? Have you found a bullet or a gun or explosives? No. (17)

Of course, the absurdity and the incompetence of such a process seem a bit extreme, but Jane Mayer writes of an even more ridiculous, and equally tragic, circumstance for another Iraqi:

There was also the pitiful tale of an Iraqi Shiite who had fled from Saddam Hussein. He had escaped to Iran, where he worked in a shoe factory. He was working there alongside many Afghan immigrants when the Iranians expelled them all to Afghanistan. The Taliban then jailed him as an American ‘spy’ for having supported the U.S.-backed opposition to Saddam Hussein. After September 11, when the United States defeated his Taliban jailers, he fled to Pakistan. But, for a $5,000 bounty, the Pakistanis arrested him as a foreign terror suspect and turned him over to U.S. officials, who in turn shipped him to Guantanamo. There, in Guantanamo along with him, was the Taliban member who had accused him of being a U.S. sympathizer. ‘I could barely keep a straight face, listening to him,’ the CIA officer recalled. (184)

Wahab’s narrative and Bisher’s story are of a kind with other stories told the play and with the reporting that would follow in ensuing years. However, the story of working in Africa undercuts the typically-British narrative that the play presents of Bisher, especially given that Wahab is released because he has British citizenship, while Bisher is taken to Bagram and, later, Guantanamo because he never obtained British citizenship. The play then quickly regulates this information, with Mark Jennings, a human rights activist, explaining

When [they came here from Iraq] they left behind quite a large nice house plus some other assets, and they thought, well, Bisher is the youngest member of the
family, if he keeps Iraqi citizenship, if there’s ever a change in the regime—and I hasten to add they were very anti the war—if there was ever a beneficial change in the regime in the future, there’s no problem for him as an Iraqi citizen for him to go back and say, we want our house back. (22)

In other words, Bisher would have wanted to have been a British citizen by affectation alone, but his Western capitalist desire pushed him toward maintaining his Iraqi citizenship, and, ironically, made it easier to extradite him to Guantanamo. The comment about opposing the war, despite suffering under Saddam is also an interesting one, given the prevalence of narratives of the American occupation as the next step in perpetual Iraqi suffering that will be discussed in *Aftermath* and *Baghdadi Bath*. In fact, the play briefly turns to a parallel at the heart of *Baghdadi Bath* when Wahab states in his last lines in the play,

> I am angered by my Government and I don’t see what difference is between Saddam Hussein and Bush and Blair. Saddam Hussein did exactly the same thing to my country and that is why we came there and we came here and we end up with the same misery ten times over—because this is supposed to be a land of freedom and laws. I even thought about putting [on] a suicide belt, but that doesn’t help [Bisher]. But that doesn’t help him. That doesn’t help anybody. (43)

Meanwhile, Bisher is represented in the play, in brief moments, in an orange jump suit, periodically having to mouth the redacted words from the letters he reads, and only able to provide simple aphorisms, such as, “Everybody is very nice. The neighbours are very well behaved. The food is first class, plenty of sun and pebbles, no sand I’m afraid. Give my salaam to everybody and my special salaam to Wahab” (30) And neither he nor Wahab are even present
in the final act of the play, which engages the detainees who had been released at the time of the
original staging, and leaves those left behind, well, left behind.

Back in the world of the play, the norming voice for the humanity of the detainees is a
voice from Britain itself, that of Tom Clark, whose sister was killed in the World Trade Center
on 9/11. Just after Wahab makes his statement on suicide bombing, Clark discusses his
impressions of the Guantanamo facility, concluding,

Let’s say for the sake of argument that among those detained at Guantanamo Bay
are some of the people who led to her death—who murdered her essentially—
that’s a little difficult for me to, you know, it’s difficult for me to say it was a bad
thing that they were there. Suicide bombing is a completely bizarre thing. It
is…if there was such a thing as evil, I’ve lost the belief that there is…but if there
was, that would be the most evil thing. So yeh, lock ‘em up, throw away the key.
(43-4)

In and of itself, these two passages would appear to present the conservative argument for the
detention facility’s effectiveness. First, it shows a Muslim considering suicide bombing, thereby
justifying his detainment (and bombing of Iraq, given his ethnicity), even if he does end by
saying that suicide bombing would not help anybody. Then, a man whose sister died on 9/11
decries the evil of such actions and, as the more sympathetic voice to most Western audiences,
reinforces the validity of the Bush Administration’s plan. This would be the rounded, Foxy fair-
and-balanced way of presenting the story; and, as the play moves on to two other narratives that
discuss organizing the camp and the onset of summer, leaving both Bisher and Wahab out of the
narrative as it moves forward, this appears to be the direction the play intends to move.
However, the second act quickly returns to Tom Clark—in a passage that appears to pick-up where the previous left off—for its conclusion:

Part of me is like, yeh, throw away the key, let ‘em rot. Who gives a shit really?
Part of me wants to say it’s completely fine. [But] another part of me [wants to understand why] have they been detained for so long. I mean what the hell have they been doing up there? The American Government put a ridiculous amount of resources into this, they’ve got so much money to spend on the war against terror, surely they could have them processed quicker?

[…] 
And they’ll never get it back, and I’d buy them a drink if I met them, you know, if in truth they had done nothing wrong, I can’t imagine a worse thing for any person, they deserve all of our sympathies and all of our efforts to sort of make sure they do actually get the justice that they deserve. (45-6)

It seems safe to assume that this opinion is not shared by every family member of a 9/11 victim, as the recent protests over a mosque construction plan not quite at Ground Zero attest to, yet it is the only opinion of someone personally connected to 9/11 presented within the play. Perhaps more importantly, the juxtapositions are established in a manner that positions Clark as the sympathetic voice against terrorism, before showing him declaring unlawful detentions in Guantanamo as an unimaginable horror, even worse than his sister’s death, even worse than the horror of suicide bombings he had previously spoken out against. Likewise, the choice to end the act with this declaration leaves the voice of critique in the audience’s mind during intermission, rather than the attempted voice of justification, thereby once again undercutting the authoritative Gitmo narrative. This, at least, would appear to be what Hesford sees when she
writes, “The play seeks audience identification through rational and ethical appeals to juridical process, legal, and moral principles, and the burden of history. *Guantanamo* frames the detainees’ oral accounts and written correspondences as evidence of the denial of due process” (36). Interestingly, though, many of these condemnations, particularly the legal and juridical ones, often exist outside the bodies of the foreign Other, and instead are spoken by British lawyers and politicians, and, as above, hinge on the declaration of the family member of a 9/11 victim. It would seem that, while Britons—and, later, Americans—can be asked to sympathize with those illegally detained, they cannot be asked to do it in their words alone. Human rights must only exist in a discourse meant to replicate the Western state, after all. As it turns out, this sensibility would also inevitably lead to Bashir’s release.

Two years after the play’s first London run, reports began to trickle out that Bashir al-Rawi, as well as Jamil el-Banna, had been working with British counter-intelligence, or MI5. As Craig Whitlock wrote in *The Washington Post*, “One day after the Sept. 11 attacks, two MI5 agents knocked on the door of the house where he lived with his sister and her husband, family members said. The agents asked about Qatada, whom he knew from the mosque. … Rawi agreed to become an unpaid informer, according to the family and his attorneys, a claim that the British government has acknowledged in court without elaborating.” Whitlock goes on to note that the MI5 called Rawi so often that his family complained, “forcing MI5 to give him a mobile phone and meet him elsewhere.” Most noteworthy, Whitlock writes, “MI5 documents show that some agents came to have reservations about whether he was carrying out their orders. He tried to end the relationship in the summer of 2002, upsetting his handlers.” The following fall would be when he would next leave Britain and be extradited by the Americans. It would appear that as long as he was willing to be an informant, he was allowed to be a member of the state, but, when
he no longer did exactly what he was told—a questionable obligation in an ostensibly liberal Western democracy—he was labeled as terrorist/subnational and removed. In both his life and in Guantanamo, Bisher becomes always at the mercy of the Western state and its legal systems and discourses. While Guantanamo clearly challenged those systems, it did so by representing them as an anomaly that merely needed reordering by the true British voices, while also representing Bisher as perpetually outside, and not even worth hearing in the final act of the play.

The Search for “Real” Iraqis

While Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen’s Aftermath allows its Iraqi characters to speak throughout the play, the same sense of Iraqis as always suffering and in need of (the right kind of) Western intervention still hangs in the air as it unfolds on stage. Aftermath bills itself as a play about refugees, with the text coming from interviews that the playwrights conducted with Iraqi refugees in Jordan. However, the work ends up spending almost no time discussing the Iraqis’ experience as refugees, focusing instead on their time in Iraq after the most recent American invasion. In other words it only acknowledges Iraqi existence and experiences when they are juxtaposed against the effects of American soldiers and foreign policy.

For Ben Brantley, this depiction makes the play “smart and sobering,” a work that makes the experiences in contemporary Iraq more real than the news could:

If you have read news reports or watched television coverage of life in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein, you have heard accounts similar to those described here. But Aftermath, being a live play, doesn’t allow you the distance afforded by reading a magazine or watching a screen, when you can turn the page or change the channel. The exiles whose tales of displacement are related here may be
embodied by actors, but you often feel that it’s the people they are portraying who are demanding the courtesy of your attention. How can you turn away?

Oddly, after years of documentary performance and theorization of ethnographic performance, what Brantley ends up stating—and, seemingly, what Jensen and Blank desire—is the opposite of what Joni Jones argued for years before, that “performance ethnography [seeks] to disrupt notions of ‘the real’ by encouraging the participants to question what they accept as truth, and to examine how their truths are shaped by their perspectives” (1). Instead of being made to question the shape of “reality” being transmitted by the performance, such a review presents a facile desire to contact “the real” independently from critical inquiry.

This having been said, Brantley was not alone in his response. Writing for Variety, Marilyn Stasio describes the play as “a superbly staged and beautifully acted testimonial to the innocent victims of an ugly war. In putting a human face on the thousands of displaced civilians who lost their homes, their families and their history in a catastrophe not of their making, this powerful piece of agitprop theater challenges us all.” Meanwhile, The Village Voice’s Alexis Soloski found the play “important” and “necessary.” And in some ways this probably is true. After all, there probably aren’t many Americans used to hearing Iraqi voices onstage—or anywhere else for that matter. Nevertheless, the play perpetually creates Iraqi identity in troubling and essentializing ways.

The play begins by attempting to prove that Iraqis are good people, not scary terrorists. Therefore, after a brief exchange in Arabic, presumably to reassure the audience that the playwrights talked to real Arabs, Rafiq establishes himself as a pharmacist and talks about his home of Fallujah: “I don’t want to, you know, exaggerate, because I’m from Fallujah—but they’re really, really nice people. It is a city whose inhabitants, the great majority, are educated:
university professors, doctors, pharmacists. But no hotel owners. Because you see: There are no hotels[...] Whoever comes to visit, we have them as guests at our house. Not hotels in Fallujah” (4). To depict this interreligious harmony, Rafiq shows pictures as he explains,

Here. This is the Sunni mosque. Most of the Jews lived on this side, next to the mosque. We were friendly with each other. One of them I knew, he used to be a blacksmith, you know, in the old traditional way? He had this beautiful face, as if it’s illuminated. (finds another picture) This is my grandfather. (finds another picture) This is a church—ya3ni [uhm]—we had Christians, we had Shi’a, we had Sunni, we were friends, we didn’t care the difference. (5)

Similarly, the character Naimah tells of the construction of her house in Iraq: “We built together with our own hands—my husband, myself, all of the neighbors; even the little ones carried bricks, one by one. We put the doors, we put the windows; all of our friends and family were part of our house” (7). Iraq, then, is established as having been a place of interreligious harmony and friendship, before the occupation, such that Brantley describes it as “Eden,” though he does so in the context of restricting any imagining of Iraq as having once been a decent place to live, writing, “But of course it’s easy to turn what you once knew into Eden when what followed has been hell.” While this formation is troubling on both ends of the equation—in its questioning of the quality of life in Iraq in previous times and its labeling of all Iraqi experiences after the occupation as hell—it does move toward the idea that there were, of course, systems of oppression under Saddam Hussein as well.

What makes Brantley’s statement such a regulating move is that the play actually displays the same idea—one of the tropes of constructing Iraqi identity, after all, is showing

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9 Though there is a semi-official/standard means of transcribing to roman letters with punctuation to indicate pronunciation, in the era of text messages and instant messengers, an informal system has developed, where numbers stand-in for some Arabic letters that outnumber their English counterparts.
suffering under Saddam—but Brantley creates his own expression of it, making it seem like the performance he watched did not contain the following statement by the narrator/translator Shahid, “Under Saddam, it’s not like we all walked down the streets of Baghdad in grey suits, like, grim faces, heads hanging down. We’re Iraqis, we’re not Russians. But we knew where the red lines were. We knew what would upset who. We knew that if we kept our nose off politics, if we didn’t insult Saddam, then: ‘happily ever after.’ We had some space” (8). Additionally, Shahid notes, “Saddam’s religion was loyalty. He killed many many people because of this. He even killed his own brother-in-law when he opposed him. If Saddam appeared on TV, the father couldn’t say anything bad, because his son might say something in school. ... [T]he father was even afraid of his own son. Everyone was watching everyone. And everyone knew everyone was being watched” (12). Unfortunately, the idea that there were parameters to the oppression under Saddam does not fit the prevailing narrative of Iraq.

Meanwhile, the play moves toward the beginning of the bombing, and the playwrights are able to turn their attention to the Iraq that their audience understands, an Iraq at war, for which the audience should feel the proper amount of guilt. Yassar establishes the context of war by stating, “I see the streets, I see a lot of buildings burned, I say, ‘wow, the Mongols have hit Baghdad.’ Everything: ‘burn burn burn burn.’ Don’t tell me there is a smart bomb. Smart bomb. (laughs) You know sometimes a missile misses its target and lands on a house. ‘Smart.’ It would not explode if it was smart. Believe me” (18). Meanwhile, Abdul-Aliyy creates a frame for viewing the war within Iraq that can relate more closely to his American audiences’ own spectatorships: “So I saw it all on TV, the statue, the moment of the fall of Baghdad. And then I said, okay, and I went to bring my family back. Saddam’s images were all over the road, hit with bullets. My wife was in shock, ‘they really hit Saddam’s picture? Allahu Akbar! God is
great!’” (19). This moves quickly into another attempt at relatability, with Fadilah stating, “You know, for a while things were really okay with the Americans” (21), a statement foreshadowed earlier in the play, when Yassar stated, “I lived normal life like if I live in L.A., believe me. I like Tom Cruise, of course I like ‘The Bodyguard’ with Whitney Houston, ‘Pretty Woman,’ what is the name of that actor--? Richard Gere. I like him, and I like his movie” (11). Without any attempts to balance this statement, the play creates a world where Iraqis felt good about the Americans, despite their selling weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, despite their funding of Saddam Hussein, despite the gassing of the Iraqi Kurds, despite the first Gulf War, despite the decade of sanctions, despite the invasion and bombing of Baghdad, until the reconstruction failed. It is not the imperialist regulation of American/Western interests throughout the world that created the problem, but merely the application of them. It is not the construct of the American state and its interests that present a threat to Iraqis, but merely the choice in American presidents, despite bipartisan exploitation and manipulation of Middle Easterners since WWII, as noted in the first chapter.10

In this way, the play does not allow for a critique of American policy until it first establishes affinity for the American people and culture. But that critique does come, first centering itself on George W. Bush’s linguistic failings, with Yassar declaring, “The doctors at the hospital, we watch Bush on television. He says, ‘We will fight the sons of Al Qaeda and Bin Laden in Iraq.’ The invitation. Beautiful invitation coming. ‘We will fight you in Iraq.’ The doctors, all of the Iraqi educated people, we say ‘How he can say that?’ And so Al Qaeda came. Accepted the invitation. Then, of course, no one could go out anymore. No gas. No electricity.

10 This sense that the problem is specific to one president or set of policies is part of why, at one talkback I attended after the play, one audience member stated that everyone should encourage people in the military to see the play, the presumption being that soldiers by definition of their career have less understanding of Iraq than theater audiences, and that there is no de facto overlap between the two.
No water” (23). Immediately following this, Asad states, “So. Here is how it starts. They come from Iran, they come from Syria—People we don’t know” (23). On one hand, this shows the real-world effects of Bush’s arrogant, off-hand answer, while, on the other, it relocates the blame for the violence on other Middle Eastern populations, thereby removing both the Americans and the Iraqis from any actual culpability. A similar moment occurs when Shahid states, “Me, personally I became a refugee at the end of 2005. I left after I was kidnapped by the police. Don’t be nervous, not American police—Iraqi police. Still nervous?” (24). Aside from being the only moment in the play where one of the characters notes the year that he or she left Iraq, it also, once again, deflects blame from the Americans for the situation that they created, especially given the American government’s decision to dismantle the Iraqi police and military. As Shahid explains, “When the American army first came, they dismantled all the Iraqi army and police, leaving a void. Then, they appointed a governing council made of two parties that had been outlawed by Saddam. So these parties put their militias in uniform, and they called them the ‘Iraqi Police’…So, there are two kinds of gangs in Iraq; there are non-governmental gangs and there are governmental gangs” (25-6). Shahid does explain the context, but buries it between depictions of Iraqis as responsible for the violence. Rafiq does not do the same, describing a group of American mercenaries, with guns and dogs, who beat his nephew to death in Rafiq’s home one night, while looking for “earrings” (31). This inevitably leads to one of the angrier exchanges in the play, with Rafiq declaring, “So why did you kill Akram? Why was he killed, who was responsible for spilling his blood, and for what reason” (32). Later he states, “I just want to understand. Who is the criminal? Who is the suspect? Who is the judge? Who is executing? What is the law? Does this happen in America? Can this happen anywhere in the earth? Even with the barbarians, even animals? Are there any truths?” (32). Finally, he returns
to Arabic to express his greatest anger: “From 1991, America has thrown soot on our faces, and you know, we know they’re just criminals, these guys, Rumsfeld, Bush, Gates, Albright, Dick Cheney. They’re all criminals, I mean, garbage. If it was in my hands, if I could, I would imprison them, I’d beat them up” (33). Given that this passage was in Arabic in performance, the majority of the audience would only be able to follow the names and the anger portrayed by the actor, but the date at the start, the information providing a historical context to the anger that challenges the start of the play, would be lost, except to those that quickly catch and place Madeleine Albright’s role in maintaining the sanction regime during the Clinton years. A similar sentiment, though, is spoken in English by Abdul-Aliyy, when he says, “You know, they said, we are going to build a model state. Is this the model? Just tell me, as a people, don’t speak as a government or regime, how can I envision to have a good relationship with people who were the reason for, directly or indirectly, killing my family? Let them answer this question” (39). Later, he continues to reverse the neocolonialist structure, “You know, Saddam was convicted and executed because he killed 148. Now every day, 148 people are killed every day. Every day, every day. Is this what we have harvested from all of this and you want me to think of good relationships with America in the future? You think about good relationships with us” (39). More interesting than these sentiments—which seem fairly natural for those who have had their families killed and lives destroyed by a nation claiming to want to “free” them—is Brantley’s reaction, which paints Rafiq’s reaction as the authentic Iraqi experience: “Like most of the performances here, Mr. Nakli’s Rafiq had initially seemed stilted, ill at ease. He becomes utterly real in rage, and you realize that the earlier woodenness of his performance is a well-chosen calculation.” At least for Brantley, a calm Iraqi is a “performance” and an angry one is “real.”
Iraqis, though, are not allowed to have a full range of human emotion, but, instead, must become icons of anger at American policy in order to become real.

As this also occurs near the play’s end, a sense that the characters are, as it turns out, not still living in Iraq does materialize. The token Christian character, Basima, states, “Ya3ni, when it’s Christmas now I remember how we used to be, and it—(beat) I don’t celebrate anymore. We have left everything behind: our kings, our stories, our possessions, our wealth” (37). Similarly, Yassar states, “Now look, I have Iraqi friends in Italy, I have Iraqi friends in Swiss. My cousin is an American now; another is in England. All of them, they tell me, over and over, ‘Why don’t you come, stay?’ But I say, ‘What, come? Why come? To be just another refugee? No.’ I want to be near my country. Iraq is not just another boulder, another piece of land. It is the cradle of civilization” (40). In some ways, it is natural to expect the play to take this form. After all, the play was performed in New York to, presumably, largely American audiences, which makes focusing on the effects of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq the obvious choice, especially in a way that creates the proper amount of white, liberal guilt. At the same time, creating a play based on refugee interviews that does not actually discuss the refugee experience—assuming that the conditions that create refugees is the same—seems an oddly self-absorbed approach, especially given the essentializing means by which the narrative was created.

Having lived in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, I have had the opportunity to have a number of conversations with Iraqis in country, refugees, and artists, and have heard a range of perspectives, from the man who left the country after his neighbor’s son was kidnapped and killed, even though his neighbor paid the ransom; to the refugee who shook my hand and thanked me (and my country) for invading and deposing Saddam; to the actor, who, when hearing of my research, jokingly, though pointedly, asked, “Which war? There have been so
many.” There are a number of reactions to the American occupation, divided by ethnicity, race, class, religion, relationship to the Ba’athists, relationship to the Coalition, and, in the case of refugees, the year when they exited the country and where they traveled to.

None of these distinctions, though, are to be found within the play, in which the characters, regardless of background all followed the same arc of appreciating America, suffering great violence, disliking American policy, then becoming refugees. For Marilyn Stasio, however, these elisions were remarkably diverse: “Just listing the professions of the characters, who represent a cross-section of middle-class life, is enough to shake any preconceptions about the sort of people whose lives were upended by the invasion of Iraq in 2003. There’s a dermatologist, married chefs, a young Christian mother, an elderly imam, a theater director and his artist wife and a pharmacist—all intelligent, articulate, perfectly ordinary people, and not a terrorist among them.” Yes, the belief that Iraqis are all terrorists is an important stereotype to challenge, but the need to define all Iraqi engagements as “not terrorist” still creates a context in which all Iraqis are defined by their relationship to terrorism, rather than in and of themselves. Brantley, at least, understands that this is a construction, but only because it depicts the Iraqis as too happy: “At first they don’t seem like terribly exciting company. They are mostly members of the middle or intellectual classes—a dermatologist, a theater director, a cook, a cleric—and they initially exude a strained, rather irritating good humor. When they talk about Iraq in the days before the Americans arrived, they present a world too harmonious to be believed, though none felt much affection for Saddam.” Once again, it is anger, rather than harmony in one’s country, that Brantley needs in order to find a representation of Iraq believable.

Iraqis on Stage
Far away from Manhattan, in the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, there have been a few more angry Iraqis on stage in shows such as *(Sub Zero)* and *Baghdadi Bath* by Iraqi playwrights Thanit Al-Laythi and Jawad Al Assadi, respectively. Yet, while both of these plays explore the effects of the occupation, they reconfigure the gaze on the occupied subject by more clearly paralleling the violence of the occupation with the violence of Saddam Hussein’s regime in *Baghdadi Bath* and removing the American soldiers and iconography of torture from the stage in *(Sub Zero)*. *Baghdadi Bath*, as the name would imply, is set in a Turkish bath in Baghdad, where Hamid and Majid, as Edward Ziter writes, “rigorously—at times angrily—scrub one another, as if attempting to wash away decades of blood” (489). The play unfolds with the characters discussing previous life experiences, as the current war in Iraq plays out around the bath house. For instance, Majid tells Hamid, “How this bath reminds me of my childhood! When my father used to drag me like a puppy to this very bath and this very tub…He’d scrub my body with pumice. He’d massage me on the table…and lather my head and body” (Al Assadi 113). Majid goes on to offer Hamid to bathe him like their father did, since the bath is empty because, as Majid explains, “Fear…People are afraid of surprises. That’s why they return to their homes before sunset” (113). Much like some of the characters in *Aftermath*, Majid begins the play excited about the possibility that the American presence might bring:

MAJID: I’m going to stick my finger in the election ink and vote for the first time! It’ll be a chance for me to hug my allies, the Americans.

HAMID: Hug Americans? *(He groans.)*

MAJID: You don’t see the good they’ve brought to this country.

HAMID: When I look at one of them in the street I want to puke.

MAJID: There’s plenty that’s positive about them.
HAMID: I know why you’re defending them. Because they keep your buses and trucks in business. You fill your pockets with their dollars.

MAJID: I swear by God Almighty, if they asked for my life I’d give it to them as a token of my love and gratitude. My body trembles when I see their president on television. I get goose bumps and have an urge to pee when I look at his beautiful smile, the dance of his eyebrows, the way he moves his mouth. It stirs my blood.

To me, he’s the most charismatic President. Look! My body is trembling. (114)

Aside from the disturbingly Chris-Matthews’-tingling-leg nature of this presidential worship, it presents the extreme version of the pro-American hope that the fall of Saddam Hussein brought, balanced against a much more skeptical view in Hamid, thereby creating a dialectical relationship between the views of the Americans, rather than representing them in a simplistic linear arc like in *Aftermath*. However, the true structure of the play is not in the dialectic, but in parallelism between stories of brutality under Saddam Hussein and the Americans. The start of this comes when Hamid begins explaining the cruelty of his brother, noting the risk of the trips to Syria that he used to take: “You’ve used me in a vile way for sixteen years. Especially when you used to fill up the bus with smuggled goods and ask me to deliver them to that merchant in Damascus, and I had no idea what they were. How would you have felt if I’d been caught on the Syrian-Iraqi border and thrown in prison? Would it have broken your heart if I’d been put to death for smuggling?” (116). Hamid, of course, had not been killed for smuggling, but he was, instead, contracted to transport convicted felons to the Radwinyya Prison under the previous regime. The prisoners would never actually reach the prison, as Hamid explains,

After driving for an hour on streets and alleys I didn’t know, I saw a huge group of soldiers. They made the prisoners get out, stand in random order, and then
suddenly they started shooting. The prisoners fell without saying a word. The air was engulfed in a horrible silence. I was overwhelmed with fear…with filth. It felt like I was their partner in crime. The world turned dark. They didn’t even bother to bury these men where they’d murdered them. They wanted to desecrate them even further, so they carried them with blood dripping from their bodies into the bus…It was the worst moment in my life. (118)

Hamid continues to explain that these activities extended over multiple nights, that “They turned [him] into a mop they used to clean up their crimes,” and then refused to pay him, calling his work “[a] most valuable contribution to the nation” (118). At first glance, it might seem that the juxtaposition of the crimes by Saddam and Majid’s glorification of the Americans could stand as a statement of support for the American policies. Certainly, this seems to be the position Majid is at when he says, “Forget the past. We must take advantage of the present situation to make up for losses. We’ll turn over a new leaf for the sake of our families. Do not despair. I will provide you with an excellent opportunity that will make you forget all my past mistakes” (118).

This plan, though, ends up collapsing when Majid is attacked and taken captive by American soldiers, who told him to drive and follow them out into the desert, then abandoned him in the bus, with the corpse of a man they had been transporting, which Majid ends up burying piece-by-piece in the desert, eventually explaining,

For three days and three nights the tanks passed in front of me and circled around me…the helicopters were above my head. Soldiers passed in front of me without speaking…they wouldn’t let me move. The dogs roamed all around the bus, in the bus, on top of the bus. Then the soldiers came running back…with their machine guns. They went inside the bus again and yelled, ‘Where’s the dead
man? What’s his name? Where’s his passport?’ I didn’t know what to do, Hamoud. I told them the truth. They told me to dig him up. I dug and dug with my hands…with my fingernails. I held up his feet…his head…his hands. They started to laugh. They aimed their guns at me…then they pushed me into the grave and covered me with dust. And then…they disappeared. (123)

The play ends with a simple stage direction: “HAMID carries MAJID to the shower. He bathes MAJID.” In this way, the play turns Majid’s love of the American occupiers into suffering at the hands of American soldiers, who torment him in a way that parallels the suffering of Hamid under Saddam.11 Interestingly, this narrative seems to parallel one in Al Assadi’s own life, as translator Robert Myers writes,

Having been a fierce opponent of Saddam Hussein, whose soldiers had murdered one of his brothers for a minor infraction in the early 1970s, he was, in 2004, I was surprised to discover, pleased that the recent U.S. invasion had created the possibility of returning to Baghdad so that he might found a theatre there after thirty years in exile….In early 2005 he returned to Baghdad for several weeks, and in spite of harrowing conditions, in which he rehearsed for eight hours a day and remained locked inside his house the other sixteen, he managed to mount a production of Women in War. When he returned to Beirut after this experience, he was as disillusioned with American-occupied Iraq as he had been with Saddam’s. Baghdadi Bath, which is one of the few political plays about

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11Kurdish Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi’s film Turtles Can Fly, about the Kurdish Iraqi experience during the invasion of Iraq contains a very similar narrative, in which the character who is most excited about the Americans is injured by an American-made mine on the day before their arrival, and looks on emotionlessly at the convoy of troops he had once been dreaming of.
contemporary Iraq, and one of the very few by an Iraqi, is clearly his theatrical response to the time he spent in Baghdad in early 2005. (109)

In this way, both *Baghdadi Bath* and Al Assadi’s personal narrative seem to mirror the arc of *Aftermath* and the comments of Wahab al-Rawi in *Guantanamo*, wherein characters hope for a better life after Saddam Hussein is deposed, then begin to wonder if the conditions under occupation and/or in exile are actually worse than what they had known before. At the same time, Al Assadi complicates the narrative in which the events occur. He does not create his characters as innocent Iraqis, suffering without action under both Saddam and the occupation, but, instead, he has them both involved in illegal activities and suffering extensively for these acts, a portrayal that at once makes them more active and more complicit in the crimes they view and suffer. Of course, this did not please all Iraqi spectators. Ziter writes, “The play premiered in Amman where it sparked controversy, particularly among the city’s large number of displaced Iraqis. Accounts of the opening related to me by several in attendance then suggest that Iraqi audiences in particular objected to the coarse behavior of the uneducated protagonists and to their description of daily life in Iraq” (489). Despite this, Al Assadi does resist the more common and obvious narrative in which the character tortured under Saddam also ends up tortured by the Americans, thereby creating the parallel of violences in one body. Instead, he shows that it is the character who pushes the hardest to profiteer off any government, regardless of its brutality or politics, that ends up being tortured by the Americans at the end of the play, thereby placing the American violence on the body of not just its fan, but someone attempting to financially benefit from the American presence. In this way, the play critiques not only the violence of occupation, but the neoliberal order and exploitations that coexist with that occupation. The play also refuses to show the acts of violence done to the characters, removing
any possibility of spectatorship. However, in paralleling the Saddam Hussein era and the American occupation so easily, the work makes no distinction between different modes of oppression and violence. On one hand, this is understandable, given that both represent forms of large-scale state terror enacted on populations who have little control over the variations of state policy. On the other hand, this elision of difference flirts with the idea of erasing the potential that the characters’ involvement creates, once again creating the image of endlessly brutalized/brutalizing Iraqis, unable to do anything but hustle and be killed. Likewise, there is a significant difference between the violence of an internal government and that which is exported onto a people. Unfortunately, in *Baghdadi Bath* all violences are co-equal, and all Iraqis are at the mercy of state violences, never given the possibility of resistance, never given a moment to hope for an alternative political system.

**A Touch of Hope**

*(Sub Zero)* tells the story of two men, known as Young Man and Old Man, who meet on a deserted football pitch, where the Old Man has a place to live in an attempt to hide away from the violence of the war. When the Young Man happens upon it, the old man convinces him to stay in order to pass their time together in a series of nearly ritualistic activities—including games, jokes, and boozing—among the white mannequins dangling on stage, their games mimicking an ever-shifting and never defined power struggle, as the two always try to better the other. Much of this is done with comical ease, including putting on gloves for their boxing sequence and haphazardly swinging at one another, yet each of these sequences is then brought to an end by a flash of red light and an increase in mechanical noise, which would cause the men to raise their hands high into the air, the unstaged military presence making itself known, even as
the audience is left to fill in images of American soldiers from the news, rather than to see them walking across the stage. Instead, in the first instance, the audience is shown the Old Man lying down on stage, declaring, “Hello Mr. Friend…friend…No. No…Stop that, I am…Stop that soldier that is shame please, please, please stop that. That is disgrace. Oh, stop that. I swear by God it is shame. Stop that. Ah. Ah. It hurts, it hurts. Ah, ah, oh, stop that, I’m crazy, I’m crazy, friend soldiers, stop that, stop that” (Al-Laythi 4). While the play represents the trauma inflicted on the Iraqi people, it still resists depicting the traumatizing violence or those perpetuating it, thereby challenging the spectatorship of the Abu Ghraib pictures.

What perhaps makes this moment most intriguing, though, is that immediately after the scene of torturing, the characters mimic the violence of the occupation on one another:

Young Man: Wicked, mean.

Old Man: You will never beat a disable, a blind and an important decrepit.

Young Man: I’ll beat you.

Old Man: You’ll never beat me.

Young Man: No, I do.

Old Man: The nation will never allow such act. I’m crippled, a war prisoner, a part of this nation’s history, this nation will fight till victory. (Sound of convoy’s dog’s bark is in [sic], the old man turns as if he is in a military assault, his crutch is a gun.) Crazy, crazy, stop that, soldier, friend soldier, friend soldier.

Young Man: Did they leave?

Old Man: Are you sure?

Old Man: Yes, of course I’m sure.

Young Man: They are near somewhere; they will never be late to come again. (5)
Unlike the vast majority of plays—or representations of other sorts—(Sub Zero) does not perpetuate the myth of anti-occupation violence or civil war as the perpetuation of the same kind of violence that existed under Saddam Hussein, as if state violence under a dictatorship and violence against an occupying army were part of an unsophisticated continuum. Instead, (Sub Zero) depicts the violence after the invasion as a perpetuation of the violence of the occupation, with the men imitating the American military, not Iraqi state actions. In fact, the play quickly turns to the Young Man telling the Old Man, “What if the convoy comes now? They will think that you make fun of them, there will be a problem, besides the problem of the convoy, there will be the problem of the barking dogs. Problems will be many. They will take us” (6). The greatest threat, then, is always the possibility of capture, of moving from the stylized representation of violence on stage, to being one of the figures trapped in photographs of the tortured and killed.

Like Vladimir and Estragon, the pair are left perpetually on stage in an absurd world, subjected to plans with no real meaning. However, unlike the characters of Waiting for Godot, those of (Sub Zero) know that their appointment will always be met, again and again, and met with violence each time. While most Western plays on Iraq end in a continued oppression and guilt, (Sub Zero), a work that began with the ominous ticker of a timer projected largely in the background, as if the apocalypse were near, ended with a projection of the characters playing together, followed by the image of hands raised to meet oncoming white doves, striving for the possibility of peace, rather than being raised in oppression, as they had throughout the show. Instead of ending in sorrow, the Young Man simply says, “We have to be happy,” to which the Old Man replies, “Smile please” (15). Perhaps this is a false hope, an attempt to hold onto a

12 Though there is at least some connection: the United States both funded Saddam Hussein and invaded, thereby creating the framework for civil war.
promise that will never be brought to fruition, but the idea of hoping and striving in the face of violence is much less false than portraying the people of a nation as the endless perpetrators of violence or helpless victims in need of the good liberals in the West to save them alone. It is an Iraq of humans struggling, striving for a better possibility on their own terms, rather than confined to the images that Western heads of state prefer.

Too often, it is this image of agency-less Iraqis that theatrical works strive for, conferring their audiences’ facile need to feel bad for the war that their nation perpetuated. Certainly Western plays such as Guantamano: ‘Honour Bound to Defend Freedom’ and Aftermath have too often taken this easy route of portraying Iraqis as endless victims of violence, in need of Western salvation, just not in the form that the British and American states gave it to them. That said, native Iraqi works like Bagdadi Bath and (Sub Zero) serve as strong reminders that the Iraqi population is as diverse and complex as that of any other 31-million-person segment of the world. Additionally, the latter work also provides a strong image of Iraqi hope and attempts to overcome not only the violences, but also the endless stream of despair and desperation that are the only possibilities in Western media portrayals of Iraqi lives. There is, in the end, an alternative Iraq, and alternative Iraqi images, when the dogma of American hegemony and reflexive opposition are set aside.
Chapter Eight

The War Comes Home: Staging Soldiers’ Returns

On Nov. 5, 2009, at approximately 1:30 p.m., Major Nidal Malik Hasan entered the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood, just outside of Killeen, Texas, where soldiers and civilians were gathering for a graduation ceremony in a nearby theater. According to reports of witness accounts, Hasan appeared calm as he climbed onto a table, yelled “Allah akbar,” and opened fire on the crowd, focusing primarily on soldiers as he dispensed over one hundred rounds before finally being shot himself. As stories about the lives of the victims emerged in the ensuing days, so too did a narrative about Hasan begin to take shape: he was a Muslim; he had given away many of his possessions in the previous days; he complained about harassment from other soldiers because he was Muslim; as a practicing military psychiatrist, he had been disciplined for having preached to his patients about Islam; he was to be deployed to Iraq in a month; he had been in contact with Yemeni-American cleric and suspected terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki (“Officials,” Cuomo).

What is interesting in this case, however, is the reporting that was lost in the debates and overblown rhetoric that Hasan’s Muslim identity allowed for. Although released in the Rolling Stone issue dated November 12, 2009, it was the day before the Fort Hood shooting that L. Christopher Smith’s article “The Fort Carson Murder Spree” went online. The murder spree in question involved an alcohol-fueled series of homicides and robberies that occurred after a group of friends returned from Iraq and finally came to completion when Private Louis Bressler was arrested by a SWAT team after Specialist Kevin Shields had been “shot ‘execution style’—twice in the head—from a distance of less than two feet” (54). As Smith writes, at five the next
morning, “a newspaper deliveryman discovered Shields’ body sprawled across a sidewalk, blood pooling next to a white picket fence decorated with red ribbon for the Christmas holidays” (54). Smith later notes that these soldiers were not alone, and, in fact, the military admitted “14 soldiers from the base have been charged or convicted in at least 11 slayings since 2005” (54). Nine of the fourteen soldiers had served in the 4th Brigade Combat Team, which had a casualty rate in Iraq eight times higher than other units at Fort Carson. Meanwhile, “A third of all staff positions in the behavioral-health unit at the post’s medical center, Evans Army Community Hospital, were left unfilled in 2007,” with pills often replacing treatment and suicide rates rising (54-6). Finally, Smith points out that there are around 300,000 soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with diagnosed mental injuries that will need the already strained mental health services, which led Justin Cole, the former chief of social work at Evans, to declare, “The trends in violence will continue. Evans Hospital is a ticking time bomb. It’s going to be the next Walter Reed” (86).

How to represent soldiers return from war, and the contingent readjustment issues—in their psychological, interpersonal, and personal forms—has also been a question of dramaturgical concern for a number of playwrights interested in crafting narratives about the domestic effects of war. In fact, while cinematic works, such as Stop-Loss and The Messenger, have received more attention for exploring this terrain, dramatists have also attempted to question how to display soldiers’ experiences with respect, while also challenging the system that would so easily use and discard those soldiers’ service. Inevitably, in the British play Black Watch, the American Oohrah!, and the Egyptian trilogy We that Are Young, what one finds is that each story of returning explores one part of the tale: the effect on soldiers, the effect on families, and the political contexts, respectively. Much rarer, despite their vital importance, are
plays that interrelate the three, showing how political manipulations of war, war discourses, and
the lives of soldiers work to inflict harm on the psychologies of soldiers and those immediately
around them to the degree indicated by psychological research. Notwithstanding, many plays
about soldiers returning do provide a strong analysis of the narrative incohesion that much
contemporary research shows to be an essential part of the struggle to overcome war trauma. In
particular, the struggle between official state discourses of war and the violent and chaotic
realities of lived experiences in war become both traumatizing and destabilizing, for the
individual and the state, throughout the narratives of all the plays under discussion in this
chapter.

When the Brain Becomes Volatile

For years, dealing with the issue of PTSD in connection with violent crime has been
difficult. Statistics on crime rates in the military relative to the civilian population are difficult to
formulate,¹ because few want to perpetuate images of either psychotic soldiers or the mentally ill
as violent, and much debate has existed over the extent to which combat and PTSD create violent
tendencies and the extent to which the military/war attract a demographic skewed toward
violence.² However, regardless of the demographic constituency, almost all research now
indicates that extended combat time enhances the likelihood of PTSD, and, by extension, alcohol

¹ There are many reasons for this. Because military personnel skew toward young males, they are already
statistically more likely than the general population to commit crime, but, at the same time, are not representative of
a random young male population. Additionally, crime on and off bases are sorted separately. Likewise, there are
broad differences between different service populations, between services, and between bases, and, with regards to
PTSD, between durations in combat zones. For example, an Air Force tour lasts four months, while an Army one
lasts fifteen months, and often in very different conditions. Thus, a study by Neighborhood Scout can show that the
crime rate in military towns on whole is lower than the country on average, but that some military neighborhoods
have among the highest rates of property crime in the nation (Watson). Likewise, part of the military population is
overseas, and crime by veterans becomes part of the civilian statistics.
² Personal conversations with service men and women have indicated to me that they even have a sense of a
demographic skew in some of those who enlist, though this should not be seen as an indictment of all who enlist.
abuse, depression, and violence.\textsuperscript{3} Pepperdine University psychology professor David Foy and his colleagues have found “that specific kinds of wartime experiences—notably the unintentional killing of civilians and the failure to save others from being killed—can cause ‘moral injury’ to a soldier, as well as psychological trauma … [and] ‘changes in one’s ability to perceive themselves as capable of acting in a morally appropriate way” (Smith 58). There has also been a growing body of research exploring the ties between the specifics of soldiers’ experiences and the nature of their post-combat mental health.\textsuperscript{4}

Interestingly, while soldiers also experience PTSD in Britain, it occurs at significantly lower rates. As \textit{The New York Times} reported in 2010, “While estimated rates of the condition in troops returning to the United States range from 10 to 15 percent, the new study found a rate of just 4 percent among Britons” (Carey).\textsuperscript{5} The reasons for these discrepancies are varied, ranging from increased time spent in “hot zones,” longer tours with less time spent between them, national health care, and the prominence (30 percent to 10 percent) of reservists in the American force in Iraq and Afghanistan (Carey). Additionally, regarding multiple deployments, an article in the \textit{Journal of Traumatic Stress} notes, “Service members with more pronounced PTSD

\begin{footnotes}
3 See, for instance, Daniel Engber’s \textit{Slate} article “Is There a Lot of Crime on Military Bases?”

4 The \textit{Journal of Traumatic Studies} recently published a series of articles exploring the relationship between soldiers’ experiences and their mental health, such as “The Impact of Reported Direct Killing on Mental Health Symptoms in Iraq War Veterans” (Maguen, et. al.).

5 As noted above, there are other studies, particularly ones focusing on the Army, that produce much higher rates. One, for example notes that

Although the 39.1\% rate of presumptive PTSD (using the more conservative cut score of 50) is high compared to some mixed primary care samples in VA (e.g., 18\% in Normal et. al., 2006; 11\% in Yeager et al., 2007), it is similar to the 37\% rate reported for another primary care sample of [Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom] veterans (Jakupcak et al., 2008)…These findings suggest there is a higher rate of PTSD symptoms among OEF and OIF veterans, perhaps reflecting the relative recency of their exposure to combat. It also is possible that the context contributed to a higher PTSD screening rate because participants were seen in a clinic dedicated to OEF and OIF veterans, which may have mitigated concerns about reporting symptoms. (McDevitt-Murphy, et. al. 110)

Taking this into account, there appears to be wide discrepancy in numbers depending on what branch of service a study examines, how quickly upon return a survey is taken, and setting, with the American government (and, one would assume, the British as well) often choosing the low end of the scale, and rarely splitting out the difference between, as one example, Army soldiers in the red zone and Air Force airmen who don’t touch down in combat zones.
\end{footnotes}
symptoms prior to deployment will warrant more intensive mental health interventions aimed at managing existing symptoms prior to deploying and/or should be given the opportunity to recover prior to engaging in intensive combat” (Vasterling, et. al. 49). Essentially, the research implies that the brain operates like a set of unstable chemicals that need a chance to rest and reduce their state of disruption. And reservists become destabilized even quicker, since the change in lifestyle is an even more violent disruption. Thus, when films like Stop-Loss depict soldiers returning to war, either by choice or command, as a way of dealing with the inability to adapt to the homefront, what one sees is a choice to exacerbate the state of disruption and reduce the likelihood of restabilizing at a later date. Of course, some minds, like some chemicals, become more destabilized than others. And some explode.

While there has been a long history of representing the experiences of soldiers returning from war and what we now call PTSD through narrative work—representations like The Best Years of Our Lives predate such terminology—there is also an interesting body of work that defines PTSD, in part, as narrative incohesion. For example, Karen J. Burnell, Nigel Hunt, and Peter G. Coleman pull the language of narratology and psychology together when they write that “Clinically, the presence of a fragmented narrative existing simultaneously with vivid and emotionally threatening flashbacks is defined as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” (93). As they explain later, “in order for a person to work through traumatic memories and reach reconciliation, a story must be coherent” (95). Considering the overlap between narrative order and trauma, it is not surprising that so many dramatists have turned to representing the return of soldiers from war. In addition to the natural tension of readjustment and the political efficacy of writing a pro-solider/anti-war play, the soldiers would be attempting to order the narratives of their experience, just as the playwright is attempting to order his or her play. Given the role that
official war narratives play in exacerbating this narrative incohesion, the question, then, is whether these works unfold in ways that challenge or support official discourses about soldiers’ readjustments.

A Legacy Discontinued

Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* is probably the most successful play about soldier’s experiences in the war in Iraq. Developed in coordination with The National Theatre of Scotland, it premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, before transferring to London and later New York. The play developed as a work of documentary theater, based on interviews with members of Scotland’s Black Watch Regiment, and moves between scenes of the playwright interviewing the soldiers, scenes of the soldiers at war, and tales of the regiment’s storied history. It is in the last of these details that the Black Watch soldiers found their readjustment process particularly jarring: their regiment was being disbanded after nearly three hundred years of history. As one soldier, Cammy, explains,

> We started before Culloden. We dinnay really ken when. 1715 or 1725. When Scotland was an independent nation we were fucking mercenaries tay half ay fuckin Europe. But it was 1739 when we really threw our lot in way the British. *Beat.*

> Some people thought we chose this dark tartan tay reflect our black, betraying hearts. Bollocks. Fuck all that Cullodenshite. The Highlands were fucked. *Beat.*
And they let us keep our weapons. Our kilts and our bagpipes. And they told us that we’d never have tay serve abroad. *(Laughs.)* But that’s the fucking army for you. *(Burke 31)*

…

In the Second World War we were at Dunkirk but we got left behind way the rest ay the Highland Division. We reformed and fought through Sicily and Italy to Monte Cassino. In Burma with the Chindits we fought in Asia which we did again in Korea against the Chinese hordes. We got sent tay Africa tay crush the Mau Mau rebels. We’d been in Africa before of course. At Tobruk and El Alamein in North Africa again. In Egypt, where we’d been in 1917 too. Before we went tay Palestine tay take Jerusalem. Then Syria tay drive out the Ottoman Turks. Which we did in 1919, in Mesopotamia.

*Beat.*

Mesopotamia?

*Beat.*

Where the fuck I heard that before?

*Beat.*

Oh…aye.

*Beat.*

Here we are.

*Beat.*

Again. *(33)*
Not only do the Black Watch soldiers carry their own responsibilities and burdens into battle, as well as those of their fellow soldiers, but they also carry the burden of a long historical legacy to upkeep, all the way to the markings on their uniforms. And this particular group of soldiers also carried the burden of being the last in that chain. This is made clear in one of a series of Officer emails in the play, when the message back to a loved one is shaped not by personal details, but by explaining the current reorganization: “Yes, my darling, we’ve heard of little else but the anger that has greeted the news of the amalgamation of the Scottish regiments. And although I find it dispiriting to have the forces of people’s ire on the reorganization, I have to say the Government’s timing leaves a lot to be desired. To dissolve the Black Watch during this deployment is bizarre” (42). The Officer continues to explain the consequences of the decision, telling “darling,” “Retired soldiers and officers are criticizing the reorganisation because they feel passionately about our history. So do I. But the Black Watch will continue to recruit from Fife and Tayside. We will keep our name, most of our uniform and the Hackle. The essence of the regiment will continue. My main worry is the effect all this fuss could have on the morale of those serving now” (42). The juxtaposition between the nameless officer of the e-mail and Cammy’s unofficial history of the Black Watch is dynamic. Cammy knows all the details, but it is a history of being fucked for him: fucked mercenaries, fucked Highlands, fucked army, and fuckin’ Mesopotamia. And his homeland is one of meeting his mates in the bar, of drinks, of only agreeing to meet with the playwright because his research assistant is an attractive “bird,” and settling instead to barter his war stories for drinks (5). And Cammy is the one who talks Stewarty back when he threatens to break the Writer’s arm toward the end of the play, so the Writer can better understand the pain of Iraq (65). War trauma. Alcohol. Aggression. It is like a checklist of what led to the increase in arrests among British soldiers. Meanwhile, the
Officer’s narrative remains clean, calm, detached, and bureaucratic, even when, presumably, not writing to someone else in the military. It is a stark juxtaposition of the Black Watch’s legacy, the official history and concern for the men on the ground, balanced against the wounds of the men on the ground and the irony by which they view that history.

Of course, the Officer still at least showed concern for the psychological effect of the experiences on his men. Earlier in the play, the narrative was shaped through the bickering of politicians, with Alex Salmond, the leader of the Scottish Nationalists, declaring, “These are professional soldiers, they’ll do their job, regardless of the danger, they’re among the finest infantry soldiers in the world, but we and I believe that this deployment was political in its nature, we think the request was political, the answer was political, during the American presidential election” (8-9). Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon says of Salmond, “He and his colleagues and other Members of Parliament who raise that issue were given absolute assurances by me, by the Prime Minister, by other members of the Government, that there was simply no political motive underlying this request from the United States, that this was a straightforward military request, along military lines of communication to satisfy a specific military task” (9).

However, by the time the unpopularity of the war filters down to the soldiers in the field, it comes in the form of a Sergeant deciding who will do an interview by saying, “That cunt, on the fucking six o’clock news? Beat. This war’s unpopular efuckinough wayout that. (To Cammy.) Just smile and reassure the great British public that you are happy in your job” (36). Once again, there is a split between the official discourse and that of soldiers in the field. For the politicians, the soldiers are a means by which to pursue preexisting agendas and concerns, while the soldiers experience the possibility of an interview as exciting, and have their lives
manipulated both to pursue the preexisting political agenda and to shape the image of the battlefield that will minimize resistance to that agenda, as becomes clear when Cammy breaks the narrative during his interview:

Reporter: You worry sometimes about the way that [having porn on the transport] must play in the Islamic world?
Cammy: Aye.

Beat.

They much prefer it when we’re shooting at them.

Cameraman: Okay, gang.

Reporter: How have you found life here in Camp Dogwood? There’s been a lot of controversy at home about the deployment.
Cammy: It’s a buzz, you’re in a war ay, but you’re no really doing the job you’re trained for but it’s no like they’re a massive threat tay you or tay your country, you’re no defending your country. We’re invading their country and fucking their day up.

Reporter: Right. Okay. Great. Brilliant. We just need to film that again, but without the swearing. (38).

For the politician, then, the juxtaposition becomes one of political goals, but for their soldiers it is one of battlefield traumas without actual purposes. After all, they’ve been to Mesopotamia before. In the context of the historical legacy and the doing away of the regiment, the meaninglessness of this last battle is exacerbated. As Cammy says at the end of the play, “Fucking shite fight tay end way though” (72).
Meanwhile, the soldiers still have to deal with the reality of war, including mopping up the blood after fellow soldiers have been killed (68). Through this juxtaposition, the play presents the characters as without a discursive space of their own, unable to fit within either the pro- or anti-war narratives after having fought and seen friends die in a battle that they did not necessarily have a deep commitment to, and facing the dissolution of their unit on top of this. It is no wonder that the Writer (the name for the playwright conducting the interviews within the play) finds the soldiers at a bar, one of the few spaces they can retire to and explore their experiences on their own terms. And it is no wonder that, in the narrow space and controlled narratives that did not leave room for the soldiers’ realities—that wanted them to tell them again without all the swearing (and, presumably, without all the violence)—that many other soldiers struggled with depression, PTSD, violence, and drinking. Their words and histories had already been replaced, after all. Similarly, Burnell, Hunt, and Coleman write that coping with trauma is a process of developing healthy narratives: “[I]n order for a person to work through traumatic memories and reach reconciliation, a story must be coherent. The story must link together rather than comprising individual separate events. In addition, the story must contain emotional evaluation, structure, and truth. These components provide a sense of integrity, purpose, meaning, and identity for the narrator. Of these, integration has been argued to be a vital element of coherence” (95). The problem for the Black Watch soldiers is that their narration, their discourse, exists in contradiction to the narratives about the war, where they are either manipulated Scottish heroes or serving a greater cause for Britain. Additionally, as the last in their line, they are removed from the continuity that helps order traumatic experiences. And the particular soldiers in this play were largely young and unmarried, without a home to return to or a stable structure to lean on.
When Love Is Not Enough

Unfortunately, as Bekah Brunstetter’s *Oohrah!* points out, the stability of the home front, particularly when its expectations have been shaped by the official discourse, can also exacerbate the tensions of readjustment. Her play tells the story of the return of an American Army captain, Ron, from his third tour in Iraq to his family in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where his attempts to settle back into his home life are juxtaposed against the dreams of combat held by the young Chip, a wannabe Marine in his early twenties, who still wears the uniform after having been washed out of boot camp because of his asthma.\(^6\) Meanwhile, Ron’s wife, Sara, dreams of having an idealized home and life, telling her sister, Abby, about preparations for their daughter’s coming out party: “Rachel Raye says to get started *early* okay, she says to freeze them and then you’ll have less to be stressed out about when the party comes!” (8). And their daughter, Lacey, also fantasizes about being a Marine.

In “The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience,” Jane Robinett notes that “Traumatic disjunction occurs away from the combat zone as well. The failure of friends, neighbors, and other civilians, older and younger, to recognize the complexity of the losses produced by participation in combat and the resulting psychological trauma adds another layer to the devastation which the soldier must endure, and the lack of compassion deepens his isolation” (300). Much like the soldiers in *Black Watch*, Ron exists within a space where the narrative of his experience—though never explicitly stated within the play—doesn’t fit the narrative on the home front. However, in Ron’s case, it is not the official narrative or a historical legacy that he

\(^6\) Interestingly, there have been a number of similar instances. One, oddly enough from after the play’s release, actually involves a thirty-nine-year-old man, Steven Douglas Burton, who was caught impersonating a Marine at a high school reunion, after a Navy commander realized the ribbons and medals that Burton wore did not appear authentic, as happens with Chip and Ron in the play (“Faker”).
confronts, but his wife’s desire to instantly integrate him into her perfect home life and Chip and Lacey’s fantasies of military heroism. Opportunities to integrate himself back in America, to create a narrative of his experience that works through the war trauma are replaced by a world he struggles to relate to and the fantasies being projected on him. For example, when he first sees Lacey, she is practicing to be a Marine in front of the mirror and tells him, “I had this dream where I was fightin with you and I wasn’t scared,” and then asks if he also had any dream about her. Ron responds, “Course,” with the knowledge that he was likely not dreaming about his daughter in fatigues hanging over the audience (18). Meanwhile, Sara has a completely different fantasy, telling Ron, “Regina from my pilates class, her husband makes really good money, he works for Krispy Kreme, he’s a regional manager. (beat) You could do that, you could work there.” Ron, on his first day back in Fayetteville, naturally responds, “You want me to fuckin sell doughnuts, Sara?” (19) However, it is the presence of Chip that brings these competing images of Ron into the most dynamic conflict:

Chip: (to RON) How long you been in?

Lacey: My Daddy was in since he was 18 years old cause he always felt called to no matter what, the feeling started when he was just round my age, a little younger, he’s just using his God given skills.

CHIP: Me too.

(CHIP and RON meet eyes over dinner.)

CHIP: You headed back over soon?

RON: I’m done with tours now.

CHIP: What’re you gonna do?

RON: Stay home, focus on my family. Maybe get a boat.
CHIP: *(unimpressed)* Oh.

SARA: And a new dishwasher!

LACEY: And a tire swing!

CHIP: That all sounds real nice.

…

CHIP: You see any action while you were over there? (43-4)

Ron deflects the last question, but the cross-table conversation represents another example of crossing narratives over Ron’s life, none of which actually involve an honest representation—or question—of his experiences or desires in the present. Chip wants a narrative to fuel his own desire to go to war. Sara wants a husband, preferably one who can help her to finish constructing her Martha Stewart fantasy. And Lacey, most interestingly, is torn between wanting an Army hero and a father at home with a tire swing.

Nigel Hunt and Sue McHale, writing on war memories, note that “These memories have become molded and adapted over time according to individual narratives and the changing social discourses through which the veterans have lived” (42). In their research, this plasticity is an expression of how popular understandings of war change over time and soldiers’ memories bend around their own experience. The problem for Ron is that the discourses at home are not only about the world, but also about him, and they compete with one another before he has had an opportunity to even form his own cohesive narrative. Furthermore, to the extent that he does want to build cohesion around the idea of being a good father, Chip continues in his attempts to deconstruct what he sees as a weak narrative, as when the two discuss Lacey, after Chip’s attempts to push Ron to talk about his combat experience failed:

RON: You think I forced that on her? She found that herself.
CHIP: Well, what you want her to be, a ballerina?

RON: Maybe like a writer or a teacher or a librarian—

CHIP: You WANT her to be a librarian?

RON: Something with her head.

CHIP: Is that what you’re gonna do now, something with your head? You gonna go desk?

RON: What? Nah, something. Thinking of doing security or—

CHIP: I don’t mean any disrespect, you just don’t strike me as a desk type.

RON: I’m not, I just got a family to consider—

CHIP: So you’re just going to give up?

(RON turns to him, studying him.)

RON: I don’t see it like that.

CHIP: No disrespect, sir.

RON: How long you been in?

CHIP: Oh, uh, not too long—see, the thing is—

RON: Cocky new green kid, I know your type, think you know everything. You been to Parris Island? (47)

Of course, the reason why Chip believes that turning attention from the military to the home front is quitting is because military combat is still a fantasy for him, even finishing basic training is still a fantasy for him, as quickly becomes clear when Ron challenges Chip about his Marine status. Instead of finding a Marine, Ron finds a young man who dreams of the Marines as his only means to glory, who believes that Ron is quitting because he was never given the opportunity to see combat himself:
I am a Marine. I just am. I tried college, I tried that. Felt outta place, why would I wanna be where I can’t use my skills? So I enlisted. All through basic, I was the best and they knew it, too. They saw how good I was, how bad I wanted it. It wasn’t til the tear gas, sir, I could hide it til then. They found me, they say I was dead for a minute. Yeah, when they pulled me out. Came back to life, though. (beat) You may think I’m weak but I got a heart like a stone I swear to God.

(Brunstetter 49)

In many ways, Ron is caught between two impossible narratives. One imagines him as an ideal husband from cable television and the other imagines him as war hero from the movies, while his daughter needs him to be both at the same time. It is the epitome of narrative incohesion. As such, it is only a matter of time until the narratives come into conflict.

Thus, the representation of PTSD in the play is literally a moment of narrative incohesion: the inability to recognize or choose between competing discourses forces Ron to respond with anger. After Chip has mocked Lacey for wearing a dress, the household finally explodes, and Sara is desperate to keep her dream party in order, yelling to Ron:

SARA: (O.S.) RON, STIR THE DIP IN THE MIDDLE, WILL YOU PLEASE?

(RON rubs his eyes.)

SARA: RON! YOU HEAR ME?

RON: I HEARD YOU!

(He removes the dip gingerly from the microwave. It’s hot. It burns him. He drops it. It goes everywhere, all over his apron. He kneels, grabs paper towels, tries to scoop it back into the bowl. He stops, pissed, humiliated, lost. He sits on the floor. CHIP watches him.)
CHIP: You wanna get outta here? Let’s get outta here.

(He stops.)

RON: And go where?

(SARA enters.)

CHIP: I know a place—

SARA: Go where?

(RON whips around and sees her.)

SARA: You’re not goin anywhere, Ron! We haven’t even done cake yet!

LACEY! GET BACK DOWN HERE!

RON: Baby, I just—I just am not / fit for—

(RON takes off the apron.) (79).

As heavy-handed metaphors go, having a soldier who has just returned home drop a bowl of dip while wearing an apron, then take off the apron and leave is about as close to a flashing light saying, “He doesn’t fit in,” as one can get. Perhaps most interesting, though, is that Ron responds to this outcast nature and narrative incohesion not by going to the bar, like the characters in Black Watch, or engaging in criminal acts, such as the soldiers at Fort Carson. Instead, in the second-to-last scene in the play, he stands atop a gas tank with Chip and their AK-47s and states plainly, “I’m gonna do another tour. I don’t know how, but I’m gonna get on one. (beat) It’s not that I don’t love them. I love them so much” (87). Unlike Chip, Ron knows that there will be no war fantasy awaiting him in Iraq, but he also feels unable to relate to his family any longer. He faces the narrative incohesion brought both by the inability to communicate his experiences and by being unable to conform to the image of a returned soldier that those around him desire. However, the ending is, in many ways a Hollywood narrative, found in films where
soldiers, either by choice or force, cope with not coping by returning to combat. Ironically, as the research above noted, this choice statistically increases their likelihood for more extreme expressions of PTSD and of having greater difficulties in adjusting at whatever point their tours do end. However, this future exacerbated trauma always occurs off stage (or screen). As Stuart Price notes, “the veteran must ideally be apolitical, a victim of events, rather than a perpetrator” (90). Oohrah! never tells what Ron did during war, and it never shows what another tour will do to him—or cause him to do upon return. However, Mahmoud El-Lozy’s We That Are Young does answer both of these questions, and shows the consequences of official war narratives handed down through the generations in one family.

The Violence that Spills Across Generations

The first play in El-Lozy’s trilogy, Bay the Moon, begins just before the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, an event whose history is still highly regulated within Egypt. Historically, the Egyptian role in the war involved a large-scale attack across the Suez Canal and into the Sinai Peninsula. For three days, this proved successful, but then it turned into a stalemate, before Israel counterattacked, crossing the Suez Canal and advancing toward Cairo, while also encircling Egypt’s Third Army. Eventually, a United Nations ceasefire was put into place, though firefights continued throughout the first night of the ceasefire, which Israel used as an excuse to capture the final supply road to the Third Army. However, since this would help lead to the Camp David Accords and the return of Sinai, and, in 1988, Taba, to Egypt, the Egyptian government—and many Egyptians—view it as a victory. The fact that former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was Commander of the Air Force during the war undoubtedly underscores the official necessity of depicting this war as an unqualified success. And there are

7 Syria also fought in the north, but El-Lozy’s play is focused on the Egyptian campaigns in the Sinai.
a number of institutions reinforcing this narrative. At the Egyptian Military Museum at the Citadel overlooking Old Cairo, not only is there no exhibit for the disastrous 1967 War, but the 1973 War exhibit only depicts the first three days of combat, before shifting to the Camp David Accords. And the preeminent tribute to the 1973 War is to be found in Nasr City. An upscale neighborhood designed during the Nasser era and housing many government installations, as well as a major sports complex and Cairo’s largest mall, Nasr (appropriately meaning “victory”) City also houses the October Panorama, a large tribute to Egypt’s victory in 1973 that was co-financed and co-designed by North Korea. Around the circular building are placed a number of the Egyptian and Israeli military vehicles used in the war. Inside, groups are taken from a diorama about the war to a film about it, and, finally, to a panorama of fighting, weapons, fallen Israeli flags, pounding drums, and a periodic chant of “Allah Akbar” between historical segments in the narrative as the room turns. Much like the Chuck Norris and Sylvestor Stallone Vietnam films of the eighties (or Black Hawk Down and 24 today), the Panorama exists as a spectacular means to rewrite a violent and questionable military campaign as a triumphant victory in order to promote current policy. And just in case one is not sure of the goals, as one enters the Panorama, a giant mural on the wall facing the front doors depicts Mubarak pointing out strategic positions to then President Anwar Sadat. After all, everyone knows who the greatest hero was. This, though, is not the tale of 1973 that el-Lozy tells.

Bay the Moon tells the story of how the 1973 War effects the couple Ali, an Egyptian who is called up for service just before the start of the war, and Carol, an American in Egypt who

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8 A similar monument also exists in Damascus, celebrating Syria’s “victory” in the same war.
9 The actual depiction is of Egyptian soldiers breaking through the Bar-Lev line, the name for the significant Israeli fortifications along the Suez Canal, which the Egyptians pushed through in about two hours, a feat still studied at military colleges around the world.
10 The relative success of this spectacular propaganda is somewhat unclear, though perhaps most directly represented by one Egyptian college student I know, who, upon seeing my pictures of the Panorama on Facebook, debated my critique of the history, then simply wrote “screw Mubarak” in relation to the mural. It would seem national narratives are more popular than political ones.
lives with him, as well as their leftist activist friend Ibrahim. At the start of the play, no one
knows that a war is on the horizon, or given the presence of Israeli soldiers about one hundred
kilometers away in Sinai, at least not on the immediate horizon. Instead, the debate over
relations between the United States and Egypt takes on a light tone near the play’s beginning,
with Ali telling Carol, “[B]eing an American is not an asset but a liability. (Patting her on the
cheek with obvious mock compassion) The rest of the world doesn’t love you as much as you
love yourself or think you deserve to be loved” (el-Lozy, Bay 10). Carol responds simply, “Oh,
I’ve learnt that. I learnt it the moment I took off from JFK,” to which Ali replies, “But Ibrahim
is right, you know. Nobody’s innocent in a democracy. All are equally guilty by association.
Unfortunately for your tender souls, the right to vote and free elections have robbed you of your
political innocence…You’ve lost your virginity…unlike us” (10). At the same time, there is a
note of more serious criticism when Ibrahim discusses the relationship between Ali and Carol
with Ali:

You are a product of your environment, and since your environment was
successful in producing someone like you, the least you could do is devote some
of your energy to its improvement. But ever since you’ve fallen into the clutches
of that woman, all you can think of is how terrible life is in Egypt, how there’s no
future for anyone who stays here, and how wonderful it would be in bubblegum
land. You don’t want to belong here and you will never belong there. You’re
nothing. Take my advice. Go to America and stay there. There is no place for
nowhere men in Egypt. (17)

The relationship between Carol and Ali even becomes a minor issue when Ali is told to fulfill his
reservist obligations for what he believes will be maneuvers, but what turns out to be the 1973
War (23). While Ali is at war—and eventually goes missing—Carol remains in Ali’s apartment, where Ibrahim ends up looking out for her, while an American friend tells her, “You’ve been hanging around that Egyptian guy too long, that’s what it is. Just don’t go native on me, okay?” (41). However, when Ali does return, he is limping, scarred, without a desire to talk to anyone, and the first act ends with him on his knees and sick, while Carol watches, concerned and confused.

In the second act, the audience is slowly shown what happened to Ali during the war, as he tells Carol,

I am not going to any bloody hospital! You don’t know what it’s like! You know what they do to you there? They drag in half-witted kids who offer you stupid presents to express their gratitude for getting yourself blown off on their behalf! They tell you what a hero you are! How proud they are of everything you’ve done for the country! They stare at you with adoring eyes and tell you with a tearful voice that your butchered leg is really your own personal badge of patriotism and courage! (Pause) It was a mine. A bloody mine. We drove right over it. (laughing) And it happened after the cease-fire. How stupid. How stupid. (Pause) The others died. All of them. I wanted to die too. (Pause) The pain…the pain was…(Pause) We had run out of morphine. (49)

Later, Ali also tells Ibrahim, “That war became a joke after the fourth day. A very bad joke. Our hands were tied. (Pause. Quietly) Our hands were tied. (Pause) I don’t know what happened. But there are two crucial questions that need to be asked. One: what were we fighting for? Two: who were we fighting against? If you can formulate answers to these questions, then I’m sure everything will fall into place. It will all make bloody sense” (65). As noted previously, one
definition of PTSD is a state of narrative incompatibility, and Ali has been placed in an extreme version of that. Not only has he been placed into war conditions that his government does not want him to describe to people, but he also believes that the war that is being represented as a great victory had no true point. Writing on the communal construction of healthy war narratives, Burnell, Hunt, and Coleman note, “Whilst the creation of a narrative can be achieved alone, survivors of trauma more commonly use social support when managing memories and posttraumatic symptoms that may arise from the traumatic event” (92). Sadly, Ali does not have this option because his experiences challenge the official narrative, thereby isolating him from many other soldiers, embittering him toward Ibrahim’s leftist politics, and alienating him from Carol, given the American support for the Israeli state. As he tells Carol late in the play, “Don’t you see? The steel that tore off the limbs of those chaps was made in your bloody US of A. It was paid for by American taxpayers. It was a gift from the people of America—your people—to the people of Israel” (el-Lozy, Bay 91). If this alienation were not bad enough, he also still has to deal with the Egyptian state’s opinion of his reaction.

Late in the second act, Ali meets with Abul Fadl, an elderly Egyptian officer, who tells Ali, “I have a report which includes, among other things, a list of officers whose behavior during that last war hasn’t been too orthodox,” to which Ali responds, “There was little about that war that was,” before acknowledging that he is not surprised that his name is on the list (81). This leads to a tense exchange between the two:

ALI: You mean to say that while we poor sods were burning our arses in the desert, you people were sitting in your offices happily gathering intelligence on your own armed forces?

ABUL FADL: It’s part of our job.
Ali: You would have done better to collect intelligence on the enemy.

Abul Fadl: (smiling) We do that too.

Ali: Do you, really? Then tell me what happened to the Deversoir. Tell me why we were ordered to stop when there was nothing to prevent us from going all the way to the passes. Tell me what happened in Suez. Tell me. I’m listening. (82)

There is no official explanation ever given within the play, as the narrative that stands within sites like the October Panorama was already beginning to take shape, and Ali already had a significant strike against him: he had been one of the soldiers to break the ceasefire, though he gives quite a different take on those actions—which, of course, also exist outside of the official narrative, given that the official story never tells of the Israeli counteroffensive, let alone the U.N. ceasefire:

When the cease-fire was announced, we respected it and began consolidating our positions. I don’t need to remind you what the other side did. (Pause) The enemy was stationed in some areas at less than five hundred yards. We could hear their voices. It was suddenly very quiet and peaceful out there, almost relaxing. Then, one morning, they brought a bulldozer and started piling up sand into large dunes. You know what that means. They would have placed their tanks behind them, hull down, and rained hell on us. Something had to be done. I mean, we got back every inch of that territory at tremendous cost. We left a trail of blood behind us. There was no way any one of us would have accepted retreating…which we would have been forced to do if they had succeeded in positioning their tanks. (83).
If the official narrative is one of a triumphant victory lasting only three days, then Ali’s story of being abandoned, breaking a ceasefire to save his own life, carrying psychological and psychical wounds that go untreated, and believing that all of this was for a pointless war hardly fulfills the expected role for a soldier. Given this dichotomy, rather than any healthy psychological support for Ali, he is told to leave the country before he can be arrested, with the implication that return will not be likely. Meanwhile, in the world around the play, the original production, scheduled for the fall of 2000 at the American University in Cairo, was banned at the last minute, by the Bureau of Censorship, a rare act for an English-language play at the AUC. Not only was Ali’s trauma never allowed to be healed, but nearly thirty years later, it still could not be spoken.

While this would place both the writing and “staging” of this play before any of the events of 9/11, it is only the first in the trilogy. In the second play, *And Then Went Down the Ship*..., Carol rediscovers Ali in Beirut during the Israeli siege in the early eighties, where, one is led to believe, he eventually dies. And, then, in the third play, *Us and Them*, Carol returns to Egypt with her son, Ali, on the eve—literally—of the invasion of Iraq, at a point where the entire nation seems to suffer from a collective case of PTSD, after twenty years of living in a state of emergency.

The play begins with Ali’s son Ali being detained and questioned by American customs agents, who start by asking about his father and whether Ali sees himself “as American or as Egyptian,” to which Ali turns to an African American guard and asks, “Do you see yourself as American or as African?” (7). In this moment, the play opens with the father’s legacy—particularly his legacy of exile and disappearance brought on by the trauma of the 1973 War being born out onto the son, in a much more dynamic way than Lacey’s strong identification
with the military in *Oohrah!* It would also appear he handles being questioned in a way similar to his father, with equally problematic results:

AGENT 2: If your father was never involved in terrorist activities, why would the Israelis want to kill him?

ALI: It’s the sort of thing they do. But I don’t take it personally. That very same summer they also killed over twenty thousand other people. Not to worry. They were just Arabs all dying to go to Heaven… You know, for the seventy virgins…

*Pause.*

AGENT 1: But your mother would know.

AGENT 2: I’m pretty certain she would.

AGENT 1: Sure. What with her being friendly and all…

ALI: Watch it now…

AGENT 1: You think your mother has something to hide?

ALI: *(angrily)* You mention my mother one more time and I’ll…

AGENT 1: And you’ll what? Getting shy about mama's “international connections”, “love child”?

ALI: *(getting up)* I warned you not to mention my mother again!

AGENT 2: *(pushing him down)* Sit down! I said sit down, you little punk!

AGENT 1: You make one more unauthorized move and we’ll have to take protective action against you.

ALI: *(sitting back)* Go screw yourself! *(12)*
Eventually, this give and take pushes to the point of the agents threatening to have Ali extradited to Egypt, with one agent saying, “We’ve sent them some cocky motherfuckers just like you before,” and the second filling in the details:

And they didn’t look that cocky when we got them back. Those we got back.

You know what’s really cool about your old man’s country? It’s how fucking flexible it is. No fucking human rights lawyers raising hell over what’s legal and what isn’t! You know what they do to members of fucking human rights organizations there? No? They chuck them in the slammer and turn them into fucking bitches. Now isn’t that just dandy? And you will tell them everything they’ll want you to say. That’s what you’re up against, boy. So play ball with us.

Play ball with us or else… (Ali doesn’t answer) You hear me? (16-7)¹¹

Aside from replicating the rape-as-torture iconography discussed in the second chapter, this moment also puts Ali in the position of his father: questioned by officials of his native country and driven to exile, even though America is supposed to be more “free” than Egypt. As Ali tells his mother while they’re looking at the Pyramids, “It’s not my home. It never was my home. And it will never be my home” (22). Ironically, given his father’s death, Ali prefers living in Beirut, finding Cairo only hospitable to foreigners, noting that “Every Egyptian is a suspect unless accompanied by a foreigner, preferably an American. Thanks for being here for me, Mom” (21). Instead, he sees pre-blockade Gaza as “the only place on the face of this planet where I have found hope for something different from the fucked up way of life we have been

¹¹ Though the idea that an American citizen could be extradited still appears to be somewhat mythic, the policy of extraditing non-nationals, from around the world, to Egypt dates back to the 1990s. As Jane Mayer writes in The Dark Side, “Given Egypt’s difficulties of halting terrorism on its own, using more conventional police methods, [the Ambassador Edward S.] Walker endorsed the plan” and “Each rendition was authorized at the very top levels of both governments” (113).
brainwashed to worship,” but previous run-ins with Israeli authorities, and Egyptian regulation of
the Rafah border, prevent his return to Gaza.

Despite this setup, the bulk of the play occurs at the beach resort house of Ibrahim’s
sister, a location where Egyptians wish they were Americans, Americans complain about Arabs,
and Ibrahim’s politics have fallen by the wayside, having been traded in for a successful writing
career where he now calls Palestinians terrorists and promotes neoliberal economic policies (73).
This point is most dynamically underscored when his eldest daughter, Layla, tells Ibrahim,
“Teach me how to live without self-respect. Teach me how to live without dignity. Teach me
how to become a ‘good’ Arab. Teach me how to become like you” (72). This is an enlightened
perspective compared to that of Ibrahim’s sister Khadiga, who decries how Nasser “ruined” the
“richest families in Egypt,” and declares, “America is my second home. It is. It really is. My
second home. And I absolutely have to go to Paris twice a year. If I don’t go to Paris I have a
nervous breakdown. It is a must for me. A must” (43). Meanwhile, Ibrahim’s youngest
daughter, Fatma, goes to school in the United States, will only answer to Tammy, and declares,
regarding searches like that which Ali went through,

It’s all because of terrorism. Because, you know, the terrorists, they like have no
respect for human life. They really don’t. I can tell you all about it because I
have first hand experience on the subject. See, like I really work real hard to
make guys at my school understand that not all Arabs are terrorists ... I really do.
But when stuff happens, like suicide bombings, I become the first victim. Yeah,
I’m a victim too. Really, I am. Let me tell you, the suicide bombers, they have
no consideration for others. They don’t. My friends start going to movies and to
clubs without even telling me. This is so unfair. I feel so lonely when this
happens. That’s why I hate Palestinians. They really, really make my life like totally difficult. But you know what? This experience has really helped me understand what the people in the twin towers must have felt. (48)

It’s easy to deride such characters as self-hating, uneducated, and interpolated by Western propaganda. Nevertheless, at the play’s time period, they existed after twenty years of dictatorship and a permanent emergency state, when their government had tied itself to the United States and Israel, and had promoted American neoliberal economic policies, especially privatization, to the benefit of a small handful of elites alone. To return to the idea of narrative incohesion, the characters exist at the intersection of an Egyptian governmental myth of progress and prosperity and the reality on the ground. Since they are the economic beneficiaries of this system and its mythology, they prefer to buy into the image of the American ideal, rather than to acknowledge their complicity in the struggles of contemporary Egypt. They are perfectly content agreeing with the American Abby when she says, “You don’t know how happy it makes me to find young people in Egypt, like you, who are not totally immersed in US bashing. It’s so unfair. And it hurts so much, especially when your country is trying to do so much good” (50).

Given this viewpoint, it is left to Ibrahim’s oldest daughter, Layla, whose husband has just been kidnapped by the secret police for printing critiques of the Egyptian support for the invasion of Iraq, to maintain the tradition of opposition in her family, as Ali does in his own, as seen when Layla ends up telling Abby,

Just don’t try to sell me your self-righteous paranoia. It doesn’t play well here. I suggest you keep it amongst your beautiful selves as you go down on each other in your never ending collective displays of self-adoration. And who knows, maybe soon the Iraqis will give you a taste of reality. They won’t be throwing
flowers at your trailer trash ghetto army, believe me. They will fight. They will fight and you will bleed…Bleed to death, I hope. (69)

Additionally, Layla becomes responsible for explaining to Ali why there are not as many protests in Egypt against the looming Iraq war as there are in other parts of the world, telling him, “They’re afraid,” before explaining,

They don’t shoot demonstrators in England, Spain, and Germany. Not yet. And, anyway, what have all those demonstrations achieved? The Brits and the Spaniards will still go to war. So much for the will of the people. March and scream and scream and march, we will still do what we want to do. Isn’t that the democracy the West wants to teach us? It sounds more like scream therapy to me. Let’s see what those demonstrators will do the day after the bombs start falling. (76).

She then explains what will happen when the bombs fall: “We’ll scream and shout…and we’ll get beaten up by the riot police…and we will cry…We will go back home and we will cry…And then we’ll go back to our sad, pathetic lives” (77).

In *Oohrah!*, Ron was rendered unable to adapt to a normal home life after three tours in Iraq. In *Black Watch*, the soldiers regularly pulled together in a bar to sort through their situation. In Egypt, after twenty years of the Mubarak regime and its American backing, tears and beatings are all the masses had in front of them. They returned to their “sad, pathetic” lives like Ron returned to war and the Scottish soldiers returned to the bar, not because it was necessarily where they wanted to be, but because it was the only option, after the endless string of traumas, that they were given. And so Layla tells a camera at the end of the play of her
experiences at a protest on the day the bombing began in Tahrir—“liberation”—Square in the heart of Cairo:

I was being dragged away. A State Security officer pulled me by my hair. Another one punched me in the face. I was getting kicked again and again. They took turns at kicking me with [sic] as if I were some kind of ball. The first officer dragged me on the asphalt for about forty feet. I felt a burning sensation. My entire body was bleeding. Then I received a blow on the head. When I came to my hands were tied behind my back and I was blindfolded. I was in a van that was moving rapidly. I felt sick and wanted to throw up. My head was swimming and I was very dizzy. (85)

Layla goes on to describe a series of beatings before finally asking to finish the video later.

The first chapter of this study explored the structural nature of torture in Egypt and its representations on stage. What El-Lozy has done in paralleling the elder Ali’s war trauma with the disillusion of a latter generation of Egyptians is depict the trauma of a culture of torture and oppression as being parallel to the trauma of the 1973 War, especially apropos given that Hosni Mubarak was a commander in the war and benefited from the soldiers’ suffering, just as he later profited as president from the suffering of his people. Meanwhile, just as Ali did not want to go out or see anyone after his trauma, Layla describes Egyptians as only left with tears at home after any attempt to challenge the Mubarak regime. Of course, Layla might stand as the one exception to this. There is no explanation of what her video at the end is for, but earlier in the play she tells Ali, “I’m afraid I’m coming very close to demanding revenge rather than justice” (77). Given this statement, it is possible, just as with the father Ali during the siege of Beirut, that Layla, talking to the nationless son Ali, only sees annihilation of the self as the way to engage the
structural violences that have immobilized the individuals surrounding her. The younger Ali idealizes Gaza, finding both Egypt and the United States inhospitable, but what Layla realizes is that those who concern themselves with the oppression of others will always be outside the norm in any state. And they will always be met with violence. 12

12 Interestingly, the going back home seemed to break during the revolution on the day Hosni Mubarak tried to break the protesters by sending in thugs to beat and kill them. Though protesters were scared for their lives, almost to a person, the messages I received out of Egypt that day said, “He will hunt us down and kill us if we leave now, so we must continue to protest, even if we die doing so.” It was one trauma too many, and like a soldier on a suicide mission, the protesters decided they had nothing left to lose. Through their tears, they returned to the streets and removed the regime.
On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi stood in the parking lot of the gas station he owned in Mesa, Arizona for the last time. While there, Frank Roque would pull into the drive in a black pickup truck and shoot Sodhi, making Sodhi the first fatal victim of a post-9/11 hate crime. Sodhi was Sikh, wearing a turban and beard as part of his religious practice. For Roque, this was close enough to his image of the Muslim 9/11 attackers—who, it would later turn out, had shaved their beards and stopped attending prayers at mosques in order to avoid being profiled. To justify his shooting, Roque told the officers, “I’m a patriot. I’m an American.” Sadly, Sodhi too thought he was living a life in pursuit of the American dream, in pursuit of religious freedom and a better life for his family (Yeager, “PBS”). In Tami Yeager’s 2008 documentary on the shooting, A Dream in Doubt, Sodhi’s brother, Rana Singh Sodhi, told the documentarian, “I have my beautiful family. I have my home. I have business. I have cars. This is the country, you can work hard and enjoy the life. There’s a lot of opportunity. And, you can make your own dream.” Later, he explained further, “We believe there’s one God and different paths. Different religions have different path to go to the God. The basic teaching, what we learn from Sikhism, I think that we have same in the United States. Our American Constitution say equality. I love this idea to respect all other different religions.”

That this freedom of religion, or access to the American Dream, has not been applied equally across disparate ethnic and religious groups throughout history is not a big secret, given the history of slavery, slums for ethnic immigrants, questions of John Kennedy’s Catholicism, and recent debates over Latino/a immigrants. After 9/11, the specific prejudice of the moment
turned to a collection of Muslim-looking Americans, from brown-skinned Muslims, to non-Muslims of Middle Eastern descent, to South Asians that bigots thought had the wrong look. In fact, in the year after the attacks, 1500 hate crimes were reported (Yeager). However, despite this initial increase, after 2001, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Hatewatch project, anti-Islamic hate crimes, though never returning to their pre-September 11th levels, dropped off precipitously. Until 2010. In the face of politically and religiously manipulated debates over an attempt to build an Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan and threats to burn Qurans, “[a] string of attacks against Muslims and their religious centers has broken out” across the United States (Beirich). Although still too early for specific data on such crimes to have been compiled for 2010, most Americans with cable news, e-mail accounts, or Facebook accounts can feel a change in the air as the country struggles to decide whether to choose the dream that Singh spoke of or the path of violence and exclusion.

Meanwhile, in Britain, where immigration patterns have tended to bring more Muslims of South and Central Asian descent, another country has struggled to define its own identity and vision of inclusiveness in the wake of the 7/7 attacks as well as a resurgence of the neo-fascist British Nationalist Party, which won two seats in the European Parliament in 2009. In fact, BNP head Nick Griffin himself has said,

The divisions are already there. They were created by that monstrous experiment: the multi-cultural destruction of old Britain. There is no clash between the indigenous population and, for instance, settled West Indians, Sikhs and Hindus. There is, however, an enormous correlation between high BNP votes and nearby Islamic populations. The reason for that is nothing to do with Islamophobia; it is issues such as the grooming of young English girls for sex by a criminal minority
of the Muslim population. I am now there to give political articulation to the concerns of the mainly indigenous population. The ethnic populations have always had Labour to speak up for them. Finally their neighbours have got someone who speaks for them. (Jenkins and Hamilton).

The idea that the BNP does not promote or grow by Islamaphobia while Griffith refers to the English as indigenous and talks of Muslims grooming English girls for sex is patently absurd, but it does represent the means by which racism foments itself through public discourse and debate.¹

In fact, a recent report from the University of Exeter’s European Muslim research center, written by Jonathan Githens Mazer and Robert Lambert notes that “assailants of Muslims are invariably motivated by a negative view of Muslims they have acquired from either mainstream or extremist nationalist reports or commentaries in the media” (qtd. in Dodd). The report, drawing on testimony from “an experienced BNP activist,” continues to say, “When these [BNP-leaning] commentators singled out Muslims as threats to security and social cohesion, he says that it was perfectly natural for BNP supporters to adopt the same thinking” (qtd. in Dodd). As if to underscore this, the July 21, 2005 attempted bombings in Britain even had its parallel to the shooting of Balbir Singh Sodhi, when the London police followed and shot Brazilian Jean Charles Menezes on July 22, 2005, later claiming they thought him to be a bomber.²

The parallel increases in anti-Islamic violence and prejudice have drawn many disparate Muslim communities together in different parts of the world, as a sense of being under attack has caused Muslims from divergent identity groups to pull together, such as in The Axis of Evil

¹ See, for example, Christopher Caldwell’s Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Can Europe Be the Same with Different People in It? Though the book aims to be a “fair” analysis of demographic change, Caldwell too often echoes BNP-style rhetoric, such as when he writes, “It is certain that Europe will emerge changed from its confrontation with Islam. It is far less certain that Islam will prove assimilable. Europe finds itself in a contest with Islam for the allegiance of its newcomers” (286).

² The police and media response to this shooting, as well as parallel coverage of violence in Palestine, are the topics of Steven Lally’s play Oh Well Never Mind, discussed in the second chapter. The shooting itself is discussed in the introduction.
Comedy Tour, which drew on Palestinian, Egyptian, and Iranian comedians in its initial incarnation. Additionally, the Sodhi and Menezes shootings also display how outside forces have worked to shape a sense of who belongs in this new, international “Muslim” community. Though these are two extreme examples, the slippage of terms between Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Arab, particularly in the eyes of dominant Western communities, has helped to force the construction of a diaspora with no natural home, but that ties together Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Persians, Moroccans and South Asians, into a cohesive Other in the eyes of many mass cultures.3 Not surprisingly, attempting to explore the formation of this hybrid identity, as well as the political forces that form and regulate it has been a significant concern of many theater artists of Arab and Muslim descent. This exploration has led to widely varied results, from the essentializing to attempts at positing an alternative sociality, a range that can be examined in works such as Youssef El Guindi’s Back of the Throat, Alia Bana’s Shades, Heather Raffo’s 9 Parts of Desire, and Tanika Gupta’s White Boy. Placed in juxtaposition to traditional definitions of diaspora, these plays’ examination of a hybrid Islamic/Middle Eastern/Asian attempt to show the transitive nature of identity categories, particularly in the face of the war on terror’s violences and essentialisms. Additionally, through their movement across definitions of diaspora based on location, religion, ethnicity, and hybridity, the plays show a range of deployments and social arrangements for concepts of dispersion, ending in Tanika Gupta’s multiethnic examination of whiteness—and its exclusions—in White Boy. Indeed, White Boy more accurately ends up being an examination of the fragile communities that imperialist wars and transnational labor create. In this way, Gupta takes the conservative and racist expansion of identity categories discussed above and shows the power dynamics such rhetoric is meant to

3 One example of this occurs in Hanif Kureishi’s stage adaptation of his own novel The Black Album, where some of the Muslim Pakistani characters identify more strongly with Iranian fatwas against Salman Rushdie and with Palestinians than with any aspect of British culture.
convey, power dynamics that always remain beneath, if not wholly expressed, in the other plays discussed in this chapter.

A Post-9/11 Diaspora

Given the kinds of rhetorical slippages noted above, it is not surprising that concepts of diaspora have often been murky in definition and deployment. This leads Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal to write, “In general, the Greek term of diaspora (diaspeirein, ‘to sow’ or ‘to scatter’) refers to the dispersal of any population from its original land settlement in one or various territories. This definition originally had a positive connotation but was later redefined to include the collective expulsion of Jews from the Holy Land. The diaspora concept thus gained a negative meaning in relation to the destiny of Jewish people” (2). Despite this historical connection to Jewish identity, the primarily Jewish connotation of the term “diaspora” has long been abandoned, as other diasporas, such as African and Palestinian ones, have begun to theorize their experience. As Alonso and Oiarzabal note, diasporas are now sometimes divided into experiential groups: “victim (Jews, Armenians, Africans, Irish, and Palestinians), labor (Indians, Chinese, Sikhs, and Italians), trade (Venetian and Lebanese), imperial (ancient Greek, British, Spanish, and Dutch), and cultural (Caribbean),” eventually concluding, “There is a traumatic (forced or voluntary) dispersal to two or more locations and an active maintenance of a strong collective conscious ethnic identity, which might exist before leaving the land of origin or homeland” (3). Because of this traumatized exit and relocation, “diaspora” has traditionally been discussed—as so many other issues in postcolonial studies—in a binary context. For example, Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutynk write, “[D]iaspora more often than not evokes two social spheres of interaction—the place of residence and the place from which
migration has occurred. Agency, in these multiple locations, is in the diasporic group which exhibits some form of collective mobilization around the tensions between home(s) and abroad(s)” (3). The parenthetical “s” in this formation will command more attention below. However, the parenthesis-free formation has often received more attention, particularly when formulating images of the “disjuncture or dislocation resulting from spatial and temporal distance between diasporas and their homelands” that often allows for an imaginary construction of one side of that binary” (5).

One example of this can be seen in the Palestinian American film *Amreeka*, wherein new immigrant Muna’s visions of an idealized America run directly against her sister Ragha’s idealized memories of Palestine, while they shop in an Arab American grocery store:

MUNA: Wouldn’t it be great to own a store like this? Or better yet, a restaurant. What do you think of opening an Arabic restaurant?

RAGHDA: Do you know how much money it takes to start a business here?

MUNA: I know. I meant someday not now.

RAGHDA: Why? You really think you’re going to stay here?

MUNA: Why not?

RAGHDA: I don’t know. If it were up to me, I’d get on a plane and go home tomorrow.

MUNA: You have no idea how much it’s changed. Have you seen the wall they’re building?

RAGHDA: I hear about it on the news every day.
MUNA: The trip that used to take me fifteen minutes to get to work now takes two hours. I have to go through two checkpoints and drive around the entire wall to get there. Can you imagine what that’s like?

RAGHDA: No matter what, it’s home.

MUNA: That’s easy for you to say. You haven’t lived there in fifteen years.

On the surface, this scene represents traditional notions of diaspora by showing a parallel decentered experience, where political refugees from Palestine are forced to choose between an Israeli occupation or an America hostile to Middle Eastern Americans, particularly on the verge of the invasion of Iraq, against which the film is set. At the same time, the film represents one of the problems with traditional conceptions of diaspora through its depiction of Christian Palestinians marked as Muslim by the dominant culture. Such marking works to destabilize the cultural, political, and geographic categories listed previously. After all, a Christian Palestinian in America dealing with prejudice during the invasion of Iraq after the Saudi Muslim-led attacks of September 11th creates a multinational, multigeographic, multicultural diaspora that works beyond the binary structure typically understood. This is not news to those in such diasporic communities.

In her introduction to the anthology of Middle Eastern American drama Salaam. Peace, Egyptian American Dina Amin writes,

While the four areas [the Arab nation, Iran, Israel, and Turkey] that constitute the Middle East today share a predominant religion, Islam, and a great deal of history, they don’t all speak the same language or share common cultural grounds. Moreover, contrary to common knowledge, there are large Christian and Jewish populations living there. However, after 9/11, the overall perception of the
Middle East has become one of reprehension. Today, more often than not, these four areas are treated as a monolithic entity irrespective of the national character, historical background or political affiliations of each. This wholesale negative perception has resulted in stereotyping the denizens of this region as fanatical and religiously intolerant among many others. While this attitude is not conducive to a global dialogue and understanding, it is particularly taxing on immigrants whose image in their new homelands has been tarnished by association. (x)

Amin’s analysis presents an interesting challenge for discussing either Muslim or Middle Eastern diasporas. On one hand, the term Islamic diaspora, much like the writings of Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington, takes religion as the dominant marker for a region where many inhabitants are not Muslim, makes no distinction between varied Islamic experiences, and does not adequately distinguish between the experiences of diasporic and non-diasporic Muslims. On the other hand, discussing a Middle Eastern diaspora, aside from obscuring radically different experiences as Amin notes, also ignores the influence that contemporary Pakistan and Afghanistan have had, particularly politically, on identity formation, especially in Britain, where an influx of South and Central Asian immigrants have helped form the conception of Muslim identity in a way that effects the social options for Muslims of different backgrounds. Both diasporic conceptions have slippage. At a historical moment when events in America, Palestine, Iraq, Britain, and Kashmir all effect identity formation and political concerns, the interrelationship of the two concepts can be seen in community structures that create a hybrid Middle Eastern-Islamic diasporic community in the face of projected assumptions in the post-September 11th world.
This is the primary concern of Haideh Moghissi, in her introduction to the collection *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture, and Identity*, where she writes, “What seems to be happening in Western metropolises today is the construction of geographically and socially distinct localities of ‘Muslim’ populations and the formation of a sort of collective identity and or group affiliation among this nominally Muslim population” (xiv). Importantly, Moghissi notes that “the formation of a collective identity, or diasporic consciousness and solidarity, is more often a response to an inhospitable climate in the host societies than an expression of cultural nostalgia. It is a reaction to the stamp of ‘Muslim’ with which such individuals are automatically branded regardless of whether or not they are believers or practicing Muslims, or see Islam as a defining factor in their lives” (xv). This branding is what happens to the characters in *Amreeka*. Additionally, for actual Muslims, the relationship to Islam is also in question, as when Moghissi writes, “The shift to heightened Muslim identity, however, does not represent increasing adherence to Islam as a religion, but to Islam as an ideology of resistance and the only force that at present seems to effectively challenge global power structures and domination systems” (xvi). That Moghissi returns to Huntington’s formation of some larger clash between Islam and an outside force is problematic, but at least she acknowledges such a struggle as a point of perception, rather than a de facto state for global organization.4 Regardless, this idea of Islam as a point of reference for political expression can be seen in works such as Youssef El Guindi’s *Back of the Throat*, perhaps one of the two most famous Arab American plays to be performed in recent years.5

The Interrogators at Home

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4 The concept of Islam as a structure for political resistance also parallels the discussion of the ideological underpinnings and resistance practices of the Muslim Brotherhood described in the first chapter.

5 The other, Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire*, will be discussed below.
In short, *Back of the Throat* tells the story of the interrogation of an Arab American shortly after September 11th, the title being a play on the interrogators’ inability to properly pronounce the name “Khaled.” The play moves along two arcs to tell this story, one of increasing violence on the part of the interrogators, Carl and Bartlett, and one of increasing suspiciousness on the part of Khaled. In this manner, the play shifts from Bartlett explaining to Khaled that he wants the visit to be “Casual. As casual as a visit like this can be’”(11), to Carl declaring, as he beats Khaled,

> You know what I really resent…What you force us to become. To protect ourselves. We are a decent bunch and do not want to be dragged down to your level. But no, you just have to drag us down, don’t you. You have to gross us out with your level of crap. I personally hate this, you know that. I hate it when I have to beat the shit out of someone because then by an act of willful horror, whose effect on my soul I can only imagine, I have to shut out everything good about me to do my job to defend and protect. (44)

Meanwhile, Khaled begins the play by explaining the political books on his shelves, such as *A Manual for the Oppressed* and *Militant Islam*, by saying, “I was a lit major; I read everything” (17). However, by the end of the play, Khaled is shown to have known one of the attackers, Asfoor, who ends the play stating, “I can help you find your voice too…You’re stuck. I know you are. You’ve lost your way. I can feel it. I can help. Most of all…above all else, Khaled…I know how to inspire…I know how to inspire” (51). This having been said, the play never clarifies whether Khaled had any knowledge of the attack, just knew the man in question, or was having a sexual relationship with him (a stripper finds them together in a strip club bathroom)—or some combination thereof. To achieve this, the arc of the officer’s evidence moves from an
angry ex-girlfriend to a stripper, with the emphasis of the play being on the increasingly violent (beatings) and degrading (forcibly stripping Khaled in order to look for a tattoo on his penis) methods of interrogation used by the officers.

Given this content, most early reviews focused on the relationship of the play to contemporary American politics. The New York Times’ Neil Genzlinger began his review by stating, “Someone from the Bush administration really needs to see Back of the Throat, Yussef El Guindi’s examination of the excesses of post-9/11 security.” Similarly, Dan Bacalzo writes, “The show plays on our fears and anxieties, even as it forces the audience to consider the complexities involved in the U.S. government’s crackdown on terrorism. And while its conclusion confirms certain facts, it still allows enough ambiguity to spark some lively debates as people leave the theater.” While this is certainly true, the play also represents the notion of an Islamic identity existing in response to non-Muslims that Moghissi writes of, wherein Khaled’s identity is steadily shaped by the interrogators and the white women from his life. In this way, Back of the Throat, while treating the important topic of post-September 11th state violences, also returns to an older notion of binary diasporic communities, with one Arab American man in one locale facing an interrogation by a dominant, white society. Furthermore, while El Guindi’s Egyptian American ethnicity marks the work as diasporic, the concerns of the play—violence in domestic interrogations—are specifically local, the horrors and humiliations that Khaled faced paling in comparison to those committed in both Egypt and Iraq. None of this is an indictment of El Guindi’s play, which was both important and timely. That said, Back of the Throat does feel somewhat provincial compared to other works from the Middle Eastern/Islamic diaspora to emerge over the past decade.
Muslim Speed Dating

For example, Alia Bano’s play *Shades* explores the distinctions among the South and Central Asian Muslim—and one white guy—community in Britain, as Sabrina (Sab) seeks to find an appropriate—in her case, meaning not too conservative—boyfriend. Although Sabrina is ethnically Pathan (an Afghani in India), her best friend and roommate Zain is a gay man of Bengali origins and most of the other people she encounters are of Pakistani descent. That there would be overlap in these diasporic communities is natural, given that the national distinctions, even if not the religious and ethnic ones, were all fallouts of British colonialism. What is less expected is an Islamic romantic comedy that explores tensions between traditional (what Zain calls “fundos”) and progressive Muslims, trying to find their niche in a predominately non-Muslim country.

To achieve this depiction, the play opens with Sabrina at a Muslim speed-dating session, where she moves from talking to Zain to meeting Ali, a process that begins with an exchange that ends up unfolding like a religiousness scorecard:

ALI: How religious are you?

SAB: I never know how to answer that question. I mean, how do you measure religiousness?

ALI: Do you pray?

SAB: Sometimes.

ALI: Do you drink?

*Sab looks round as if she wants to escape.*

SAB: What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?

ALI: I’m just interested.
Silence.

Have you ever been in a relationship?

SAB: What?

ALI: Have you ever been out with someone?

SAB: I don’t see how that’s any of your business.

ALI: I just can’t believe someone with your looks and dress hasn’t—

SAB: Hasn’t what?

Pause. Ali tried to choose his words carefully.

ALI: —attracted the attention of the opposite sex.

SAB: Right. (Beat.) What about you?

ALI: What about me?

SAB: Have you ever ‘attracted the attention of the opposite sex’?

ALI: I don’t think I’m going to answer that question

SAB: Then neither am I. (8)

This sequence shows Sabrina, who does not wear the hijab, struggling to negotiate herself between two sets of stereotypes. On one hand, she is situated by Ali as being outside of the Islamic main by dressing more traditionally Western. On the other hand, Zain, who, because of his sexuality, identifies in part with British sensibilities toward Muslims, later teases Sabrina that “A one-night stand with a misogynist could be fun” (9). Such binaries are not new, and Leila Ahmed, among others, has discussed in depth how the purity/oppressive dichotomy has served colonialist aims, noting the attempts to construct “a Western patriarchal discourse targeting the issue of women and coopting the language of feminism in the service of its strategies of domination” (168). In this way, Muslim women are often caught in the bind of choosing
between oppositional, yet related, male fantasies of purity and sexuality, the Taliban’s burqas or the Lebanese Miss USA’s swimsuits. Nonetheless, at least within this scene, Sabrina challenges the double-standard Ali attempts to construct, asking him the same questions he asks of her, thereby undercutting both his male privilege and his attempt to use her clothing alone as a marker of her perceived morality. This, though, is not enough to prevent Ali from attempting to act upon his fantasy of Sabrina near the play’s end:

SABRINA: You want me to be your wife?

ALI: We both know that’s unrealistic.

SABRINA: Unrealistic.

ALI: Our lifestyles wouldn’t be compatible, but there are other options.

_Sab begins to walk away. Ali stops her by blocking her path._

ALI: I’d treat you well—the best restaurants, the most expensive shops. There’s nothing stopping us from enjoying ourselves.

SABRINA: God.

ALI: He forgives.

SABRINA (stares at him): You make me sick. You’ll have to get your thrills elsewhere. I’m not for sale.

_She turns and walks away. Ali is disappointed but recovers quickly._

ALI: You’re a dime a dozen. I’ll pick you up tomorrow on the street corner. (57)

Through such moments, Ali’s piousness is undercut by his desire for the same sexual fulfillment that he would judge a woman for seeking, an old story in every religious tradition, but one that allows Bano to explore the dueling impulses that bind contemporary Muslim women in particular.
Despite this tension, a romantic comedy needs more than a villain alone, and Pakistani British Reza provides Sabrina with the man she truly desires, though the fact that he has more conservative habits than hers serves as the central conflict throughout the play. This conflict comes in a less oppositional and hypocritical structure than with Ali:

SABRINA: I guess I haven’t had the best experience with Muslims.

REZA: Why?

SABRINA: They always seem to be telling you what you can’t do and sending you to Hell for every little thing. Some Muslims have a superiority complex, and it doesn’t matter if you’re Muslim, you’re not as good as them.

REZA: We’re not all like that.

SABRINA: I know.

REZA: I wish everyone else did.

SABRINA: I guess I’m talking about my brother. (Beat) [Regarding his beard] Have you ever thought of shaving it off?

REZA: After the first attacks, having it made me feel like somehow I colluded with them. That people would think I believed what they did. I felt let down because I felt I was being asked to choose between Britishness and being a Muslim, and it’s never been separate for me. (Beat) I’m the kind of person—and it’s a very British characteristic—I’ll always side with the underdog. The underdog at the moment is a Muslim, and in an ironic way, by standing up for Muslims, I think I’m being very British. Anyway. I did come close, but I realized it’s just a beard, for me it doesn’t mean any of those things, for me it means something else entirely.
Sab looks at Reza.

SABRINA: It’s weird, for me it was the other way around. My brother always used to go on and on about how I should dress more like an Asian girl. Wear a scarf on my head so people would know I was a decent girl. And I was like, I know girls who smoke, drink, sleep around, but no one thinks they have because they wear the hijab. (30-1)

Sabrina goes on to explain that she often felt more at home outside of Muslim communities in Britain than within, particularly when she was a university student, while Reza asks her about drinking, admitting that he had always been curious what the experience was like. As the conversation precedes, the pair begin to breakdown stereotypes, both Muslim and British—and Muslim British—about the formation of Islamic identity.

REZA: And now you’re saying you have to be of a pious nature. I just want to know what makes someone a practicing Muslim? And what’s this ‘pious’ nature? How do you know that you don’t’ have this pious nature?

SAB: Look, all I’m saying is—

REZA: No, I’m interested—someone who drinks, are they not really a practicing Muslim? Because I know people who, let’s say, dabble in drinking, but they also dabble a lot in praying.

SAB: Then you’re not repenting. You’re going through a cycle that suits you, and your religion isn’t supposed to suit you. A lifestyle is there to suit you, but not religion. If part of religion is sacrifice—

REZA: So you’re saying you have to sacrifice things to be a Muslim?

Beat.
SAB: I don’t know what I’m saying.

REZA (jokey): I think you’re actually quite hard line.

SAB (smiles): I don’t know the answer, and I don’t care so long as I don’t have to debate it. That’s why I avoided the Islamic Society at university, because they will argue to death. Anyway. Being tipsy was nice, an escape to a wonderful place, but, trust me, you’re not missing much. (32-3)

Discussions of theology are not particularly out of the norm in Western arts, as films like Saved! and Keeping the Faith attest to. However, discussions of Islamic theology are not the norm in either British or American theater, nor are audiences typically given representations in which a conservative Muslim character describes himself as “very British,” or where a female Muslim character says she avoided the Islamic Society not because it was repressive, but because there were too many theological debates that she had no answer to, which is to say that audiences are not typically given Muslim characters with the same romantic and personal concerns as their Christian brethren. However, it does represent what Moghissi writes about diversity in the Islamic diasporas:

One has to be cautious, though, as not all communities of Islamic culture and certainly not all individuals within each community respond to the social pressures and racism of the dominant culture uniformly. For some communities more than others, the need for group connection and the support of the collective prompt an awareness of their Muslim identity, and this awareness is manipulated in pursuit of specific political goals by radical Islam in the diaspora. Others try to create self-sufficient and self-sustained support services and networks and
minimize their encounter with the dominant culture and its institutions, without necessarily feeling the need to accent their Islamic identity. ( xvi) 

On the ground, and in the neighborhoods, Muslim communities are as diverse as any other one-billion-person cross-section of humanity. Unfortunately, despite such tensions and variations depicted within an often maligned community, the fact that the work was a Muslim genre piece has created much more interest.

This is certainly where the British theater critics began their analyses. Michael Billington wrote in *The Guardian* that “Alia Bano’s play is something of a theatrical first: it tells us what it is like to be a young, single Muslim woman living in modern London.” That there could be a wider range of experiences than the two female characters seen in *Shades* seems not to have occurred to Billington, who also appears to forget that he’s reviewed the work of Tanika Gupta, discussed below, which also contains young, single, female Muslim characters. Similarly, Charles Spencer writes, “You rarely see the word Islamic these days without fundamentalist following hard behind,” before going on to note that “We first encounter her [Sabrina] at a Muslim speed-dating evening (I certainly had no idea such events existed).” Spencer then concludes by noting the genre-fitting nature of the work: “*Shades* proves a feelgood gem of a rom-com, deftly combining an insider’s revealing insight into Islamic Britain with cracking entertainment values,” a point underscored by Spencer and Billington’s superficial comparisons to Sabrina as a Muslim Bridget Jones, a point particularly facile given that the film is referenced twice in the play’s opening scene.

That critics should be so drawn to the genre aspect of the play is not particularly surprising, given that most were likely more familiar with romantic comedies than ideological debates within Islamic communities, and Bano certainly built a play that used an old dramatic
device—a new relationship—in order to present the structural pressures on Muslim women. At the same time, by framing the narrative within a genre that argues that smart, successful women lead unfulfilled lives until they are married, Bano also reaffirms the patriarchal structure that oppresses Muslim and non-Muslim women alike, a bias underscored by The Guardian’s decision to run its review under a sensationalized press photo of a woman in a burqa (presumably, Reza’s more conservative sister) menacing Sabrina. In fact, because the only character in the play, Mark, who is not Muslim is Zain’s boyfriend, there is never an outside world that addresses the system of prejudice and discrimination that works to limit Sabrina’s choices. Additionally, the decision of the characters in the play to raise money to aid Palestinians with a fashion show displays a commitment on the part of the characters to the economic system that works to oppress Palestinians—and British Muslims—in the first place. After all, their fashion show reinforces the consumerist neoliberal drives that help maintain the structures of oppression that support and fund the Israeli occupation. In the end, although prejudices are addressed throughout the play, the system that structures them is actually reinforced by the economic and personal aspirations of the characters. Perhaps, then, it is less a Muslim Bridget Jones Diary and more a Muslim You’ve Got Mail, wherein falling in love is more important than struggling against one’s oppressor, particularly when the lover and oppressor are one and the same.

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6 That theaters staging work that attempts to combat prejudices about Muslims regularly reinforce clothing stereotypes is depressingly common. When the Pilot Theatre in Britain staged Naomi Wallace’s The Fever Chart, a play discussed in the next chapter, their Marketing Pack’s cover had a large picture of the face of a woman whose hair and mouth were veiled, only showing her eyes and forehead, though she did have substantial makeup on her eyelashes and eyebrows. Similarly, Heather Raffo, whose 9 Parts of Desire is discussed below, has told me that she has had to fight with theaters to keep similar images off their publicity posters. Apparently, dramatically veiled Muslims are the sexiest ones in the advertising world. Likewise, CNN once linked to an article on how the media was obsessed with Muslim women’s clothing, rather than their accomplishments, beside a picture of a woman in a burqa that was not included in the article (Fakhraie). Too often, then, the pattern of prejudice is reinforced even with works attempting to undermine it.
Women in War

This, however, is not the depiction of Muslim women in Iraqi American Heather Raffo’s play *9 Parts of Desire*, which explores the life of Iraqi women since the time of the first Gulf War. If *Shades* is transnational in terms of its multiethnic composition, then the transnationality of Raffo’s Iraqi characters exists through dispersion, with characters in Baghdad, London, and America all commenting on the series of hardships their nation endured—the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the crippling sanctions in the nineties, and the Iraq War—during and after Saddam Hussein’s rule. Along the way, Raffo, who interviewed the women the play is based on and wrote its script, performs traditionalists and progressives and those for the war and against it, as well as a spectrum of other Iraqi experiences that create a more complicated image of Muslim (and Arab) women than presented by the capitalist and patriarchal strivings of *Shades*.

Despite this diversity, it is a play draped in sorrow, beginning with a call to prayers and a woman discussing the river, a reference to the Euphrates River which runs through the heart of Baghdad, before explaining, “I have walked from there to here / from the flood / to the highway of death / collecting, carrying / you can read the story / here it is read it all here / on my side. / My feet hurt / I have holes in my shoes / I have holes now even in my feet / there are holes everywhere / even in this story” (5). Through moments such as this, Raffo creates suffering as a backdrop to the humanity and struggle of her characters, reminding her audiences of the twin violences of America’s funding of Saddam Hussein and American wars and sanctions in Iraq. However, Raffo engages them directly when the play turns to the story of a painter killed during the first Gulf War:

I did a painting once of a woman / eaten by Saddam’s son / that’s how I describe it. / A beautiful young student, from University of Baghdad— / Uday he asked her
out, and she couldn’t refuse, / he took her and beat her brutally, like is his way-- / and she went back to campus and / her roommate saw the bruises and things and asked her / ‘What happened?’ / And she so stupid, innocent girl told her the truth. / Why she talks such things? / Iraqis they know not to open their mouth not even for the dentist. / Of course Uday, he took her back / with his friends, they / stripped her / covered her in honey / and watched his Dobermans eat her. / See in my painting she is the branch’s blossom / leaning over the barking dogs / they cannot reach / no matter how hungry they are / not unless they learn to climb her / but they are dogs, they never will. (8-9)

In this way, the violence of Saddam Hussein’s rule is made clear, and, unlike many works on the topic, the play also includes a pro-war Iraqi voice, the character of Huda, who, after telling about Saddam stealing women to use as sex slaves and then having them executed as prostitutes says, “So, what chaos is worse than this? / Let it be chaos at least something will come out of it. / Maybe it’s the only way / but I am / for the war / I didn’t go to that antiwar march, la / in London alone they said there was what, ya’ni, / one million, two million in Hyde Park? / I couldn’t march with anyone who was pro-Saddam” (19). That a war protester would inherently be pro-Saddam is, of course, a simplistic, though not necessarily unrealistic, conflation, one underscored by the stage directions, “A whiskey drinker with fifty years as a smoker, HUDA is an Iraqi exile in her seventies now living in London” (18). Whereas Aftermath, discussed in chapter seven, creates a world of Iraqi refugees with no distinction between when and how the people left, as well as their political loyalties and economic standing, Raffo makes clear that Huda’s once-Communist voice of support for the war is now a bourgeois expat, someone who can accept the “chaos” because she will not contact the chaos. Much like Raghda in Amreeka, she constructs a stylized
vision of what her country was that distorts her conception of what her country might be in the future. This view stands in sharp contrast to the American character within the play, who says,

Anyway I can watch it at the gym / people work out / to the war / on three channels / They drink beer at the bar to the war. / I mean, I’m blond / I hear everything people say. I can’t stop / I wake up and fall asleep with the TV on / holding a rosary / watching— / I know / I should just / turn it off / but I can’t / I hate it when people say / I don’t watch / it / anymore / it depresses me / yeah / it depresses me / I can’t / breathe— / I’m sick / my stomach / I can’t get out of my— / it’s a beautiful warm day / and I’m a cave. / I can’t walk down the street / and see people smiling— / dragging bodies through the street / for the rest of my life / Iraqis are animals cheering, dragging bodies through the street / But my family can’t even leave their house / and I can’t call / still / and we’re smiling / pointing / at / a man / naked / with a sandbag on his head / raped / with a chemical light, told to masturbate. / I cannot carry it / and they’re / thumbs-up / smiling / don’t tell me / they didn’t know / their job / not with smiling / every photo / they were / smiling. / How can I ever / go home again / and sit / in my amma’s kitchen / and say / I’m sorry / I’m sorry. (47-9).

Raffo threads the privilege of many Iraqis exiled in the West throughout this passage, as her character discusses the three televisions on at the gym and the beautiful days when she can walk down the street smiling, particularly because her blond hair protects her from the kind of racial prejudice depicted in Amreeka or that Balbir Singh Sodhi experienced after September 11th. However, unlike the characters in Shades who raise money for Palestinians without letting the suffering of Palestinians either emotionally affect them or disrupt their capitalist trajectories,
Raffo sharply juxtaposes the violence of Iraq with the privilege of her Iraqi American experiences in the United States, placing the horrors of bodies in the street and the images from Abu Ghraib into the privileged American geography that many of her fellow citizens traverse unquestioningly.

With regards to this tension between new and old geographic spaces, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc write that “Transmigrants simultaneously are affected by, incorporate, and participate in hegemonic contentions ‘back home’ as they learn new meanings and forms of representation in their new settings. They respond to and resist these constructions, and by so doing progressively transform them” (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc). Similarly, Raffo’s American balances and deconstructs the voice of British Iraqi Huda, displaying the violence “back home” that escalated well beyond the “chaos” that some expatriates—most famously Ahmed Chalabi—dismissed with their tales of American soldiers being greeted as liberators. To do this, as Basch, Schiffer, and Blanc indicate, Raffo has used the “meanings and forms” of America, not just in terms of placing Iraqi stories in American theaters, but also through creating a character that places those lives and bodies in American streets. Additionally, because Raffo performs multiple Iraqi women of divergent geographies, politics, occupations, and religions, she is able to show a diversity of female Muslim experience that the binary romantic comedy structure of *Shades* makes difficult.

Through this structure, *9 Parts of Desire* creates a world outside of Iraq that affects the violence experienced within Iraq. In fact, even Huda eventually decides, “I don’t believe anymore in revolution, *ya ’ni*, / the concept of revolution to change the values / development must grow carefully, gradually, not suddenly / it has to grow more deep rooted,” even as she still claims, “The mistake is not the war, no, America had to do it / the mistake was supporting
Saddam all his life” (40). Unfortunately, it never occurs to Huda that there is a direct relationship between American support of dictators in the Middle East and American wars in the Middle East (or British for that matter, given her London location). They are both expressions of the same imperialist policy, and the former will always lead to the latter. But she does eventually realize that change has to grow internally and from the ground. It cannot be brought by foreign armies.

Through all of this, Raffo displays an ethnic diaspora scattered geographically, yet coping with the same violence in their homeland, an interesting juxtaposition to Bano’s ethnically diverse religious diaspora dealing with issues in a narrow geographic space. That the two are related by dominant cultures that conflate the Christians in Raffo’s play with Muslims from Iraq or Iraqis with Pakistanis because of their perceived shared Islamic identity underscores the idea of a shared Middle Eastern-Islamic diaspora. However, it is a writer outside of either of these communities, British Bengali Tanika Gupta who disrupts even this category by the juxtaposition of multiple diasporic and native communities attempting to structure hybrid cultures.

Speaking from the Margins

Despite her Hindi South Asian roots, Gupta has steadfastly rejected the label of “Asian writer,” explaining to one interviewer, “I don’t like being seen as an Asian writer, in terms of being labeled in that I only write for Asians and that’s the only thing I can do. I don’t like that. I mean, you don’t hear Tom Stoppard being referred to as a Czech writer or Harold Pinter as Jewish writer, so why should one be termed in that way” (“20 Questions”). In another interview, after noting how often she is asked to write works about arranged marriages, Gupta clarified, “When people say to me, why don’t you write more broadly, I say, ‘You should see the things
I’m offered.’ I feel that I probably get overlooked. I get given the jobs to write for Meera Syal, but not for Frances Barber. It’s so galling. I’m happy to write about the experience of being Asian but I don’t want to only write about that experience. I don’t want to be limited as a writer” (Gardner). This idea has led Gupta to explore the transnational circulation of people and money in a number of contexts, from a churchyard where characters from four continents gather in *Sanctuary* to the lives of South and Central Asian Muslim teenagers in *Fragile Land* to white female sex tourists in Jamaica in *Sugar Mummies*. By moving through these terrains, Gupta has, like leftist British film directors Ken Loach and Michael Winterbottom, begun to shape a map of the world that understands the interconnectedness between the lives, economics, and politics of people in once distant corners. However, it is in her exploration of British whiteness in the play *White Boy* that she most aggressively challenges stable notions of ethnic identity.

As part of this concern, *White Boy* opens with a fight, then cuts to a scene in a schoolyard with Afro-Caribbean Victor, black Zara, Asian Muslims Shaz and Kabir, Sudanese Sorted, and the white Ricky, who speaks with Caribbean street slang. There, the group of multiethnic friends gather, while Shaz and Kabir make-out, a source of ideological tension for Ricky, who joins Zara in mocking them:

RICKY: You two should be careful. One day, you’re gonna get caught red handed. Someone’s gonna see you, grass on you and that’s it Shaz. One way ticket to Malaysia—married off to a man with a tash and a huge belly.

SHAZ: Leave it out.

ZARA: Lipsin’ is definitely against your religion.

KABIR: Where’s it say that?

ZARA: Dunno, but I bet it does.
RICKY: Look at you, all hijab and trousers—bit fucking hypocritical innit?

SHAZ: What the fuck would you know—white boy?

RICKY: I know what I’m talking about.

SHAZ: It ain’t against our religion to love.

KABIR: Yeah man.

The scene then moves on to Sorted finding a knife in Zara’s bag, the latter of whom explains, “There’s this girl in my year…doin’ my head in…keeps threatening me and stuff. Thought, if I carried this…” (14-5). Surrounded by violence, the characters in *White Boy* do not exist in insulated ethnic communities, as in *Shades*, or merely as one ethnicity in the face of external forces, as in *9 Parts of Desire,* or in a world where they primarily talk to white Christians, as in *Back of the Throat*. Instead, they’ve formed a diverse network, where all have a loose grasp on multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic traditions. Despite this, Gupta does not create a superficial fantasy of racial harmony akin to *The Blindside*, but instead provides an early signal to possible tensions when Shaz defends her behavior in relationship to her religion by calling Ricky “white boy.” Interestingly, he does not respond to this comment negatively in the context of his friends and continues to be closest to the black Caribbean football star Victor. Ricky even tells Victor, “Mi yard is mi yard. Know what I mean? But sometimes, it’s all so fucking dull. Ain’t cool to be white nomore. Read somewhere that in about two hundred years, the average human being will be coffee coloured and six foot six” (25). That, among a diverse group of friends, Ricky would choose to identify with Victor, given Victor’s athletic prowess and attractiveness to female students is not surprising, but it also serves as a marker for stratification among the various diasporic communities in London, where Afro-Caribbean is more accepted

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7 However, it’s worth noting that the characters in Raffo’s play seem to have many more choices than the ones in previously discussed works that represent Iraqi experiences.
than Asian Muslim or Sudanese. After all, it is not Afro-Caribbean immigrants that the BNP says will overrun Europe, even if this was a concern of a previous generation.

Because of this, it is not actually from non-whites that Ricky’s whiteness creates a dilemma, but from the white drug dealer Flips, who is looking for revenge against Sorted:

FLIPS: No one crosses me.

VICTOR and RICKY laugh at FLIPS.

RICKY: Him tink him so hard.

FLIPS: And what the fuck is it with you White Boy? Talk like one of them.

RICKY: Hush your mouth.

FLIPS: Forget where you come from? Forget who you are? Think you’re some kind of yardie? D’you talk like that at home?

RICKY: I is what I is.

FLIPS laughs.

FLIPS: Fucking freak.

FLIPS looks around him and realizes that everyone is watching him.

FLIPS: You can tell that refugee vermin that when I find him, and I will find him, I’m gonna stab him. I’m gonna fuck him up.

FLIPS stalks away.

Though Ricky exists in a space of cultural hybridity that he appears to embrace, even if because he feels his whiteness is under attack, Flips represents the external world of white privilege. In the case of Flips, access to this privilege appears blocked to him because of his economic status, but he still feels that it can be enacted upon the refugee Sorted, and that Ricky is obligated to aid
Flips in this pursuit. This, though, is a view of the world that Zara and Shaz mock when impersonating how one of their teachers might react to Zara’s losing her homework:

ZARA: Tell me about it. Give us one of them lectures about how people like us are bringing down the country.

SHAZ: ‘The youth today.’

ZARA: Poor diet, drinkin’ an’ smokin’ too much, having too much sex, teenage pregnancies.

KABIR: MTV, drugs, family breakdown.

SHAZ: No respect for our elders, our education.

ZARA: Celebrity gossip, live for today, selfish…

KABIR: Bottom of the pile.

SHAZ: Self-control. That’s the answer.

ZARA: Sitting down to dinner as a family every night eating a plate of fresh vegetables. (40)

Interestingly, this moment, which represents a dominant, white culture view of immigrants and their descendants occurs while Ricky is offstage, as it is not an experience he will ever be able to entirely access, regardless of his speech, behavior, or friends. This is a point that Victor drives home late in the play, when Ricky tells Victor, “Your family got the whole world laid out on a silver plate. Nice house, nice lickle back yard with flowers and ting. Mum, dad, sisters all wrap you up in cotton wool and tell you how great you are all the time.” Victor, naturally, does not appreciate the sentiment:

VICTOR: My folks work hard to get their nice lickle back yard with flowers and ting. Mam work as a cleaner when I was a pickney—tek me to all the houses with
her. Watch her being treated like shit by them white people she work for. Hardly ever see my dad when I was little—always away on jobs. I don’t take nuthin’ for granted and nuthin was handed to them on a plate. Got it?

*Ricky looks away.*

RICKY: Listen Bredda…

VICTOR: Don’t Bredda me. You got no respect. Just ‘cos you learn the lingo, don’t mean you’re one of us.

Despite this statement, Victor ends up giving his life to save Ricky, when Flips attempts to beat Ricky with a baseball bat in order to reach Sorted, who, in turn, stabs Flips. In true colonialist tradition, a white life is saved by replacing it with a dead, black body. While Ricky did not want this to happen, it is afterwards that he too chooses to access his white privilege:

RICKY: I don’t want nuthin’ more to do with your lot…

SORTED: My m-m-mother wanted me to be a t-teacher. And my father, he said, if-if-if I worked hard—I could be a l-lawyer. Then, then war. Guns everywhere. T-t-trucks in the n-n-n-ight with men and g-g-guns…I hide. I watch.

RICKY: Who ask you to come into my world? Why didn’t you just stay in that shit hole you come from? Why bring all your problem here? Your pain? Your misery? I ask you? I invite? You fuckers, coming into my country with your shitty lives and your torture stories. Like animals. Change us all into animals like you. Now I don’t even feel like I belong here. Like I’m the fucking odd one out.

SORTED: Why you saying all this?
RICKY: Because you mess up. And you mess us up. If it wasn’t for fucked up little kids like you, we wouldn’t have to deal with no shit. We could live and breathe free.

SORTED: So you can be free but we have to s-s-s-suffer.

RICKY: Why you bring your sufferin’ here? Spread like disease.

SORTED: You are lucky n-not to know what is like to live in f-ear.

RICKY: Now we all know.

That a stabbing in London is comparable to the civil war in Sudan is another absurd premise, only possible to be made by someone who has never experienced the latter form of violence, as Sorted makes clear when he tells Ricky,

I should be playing in the fields near my house. Getting water from the well for my mother, chasing the chickens to catch one for her. Feeling the sun on my back. Not here. I can’t go back home. I come here. I think, maybe I get a better life. B-b-but no one is here for me. Everybody busy and I can’t forget. My mother—my s-sisters. I hide and I watch. They r-r-rape them and then they c-c-c-cut them up. Slice them with l-l-long knives. I have nowhere to go. I am finished. Why I live? (62)

Finally he concludes, “I am not bad. I am not bad. My country kill my family. Your country kill my hope” (62).

Sorted’s statement is a straightforward expression of the painful edge of diasporic experience, one rarely seen on stage, but represented in the deaths of Balbir Singh Sodhi and Jean Charles Menezes. They are all victims of transnational systems of economic and political oppression that destroy homelands and refuse to allow the victims of these exploitations access
to the dreams of opportunity in the countries they flee too. In this way, the misidentification of Singh and Menezes as terrorist or Muslim, as well as the hybrid community of Ricky’s world, represent one diaspora that excludes religious and ethnic identity: oppressed transnational labor. Quite simply, imperialist wars help create easily exploited populations, whose identities can be erased or blurred as they become a de-individualized labor supply. Certainly, this seems to be at the heart of what Ambalevar Sivanandan expresses, when she writes,

> Even genuine refugees and asylum-seekers are being sent back to the countries they have escaped from on the grounds that they are economic and not political refugees, which overlooks the fact that it is the authoritarian regimes maintained by western governments, in Third World countries, on behalf of transnational companies, that throw up refugees on western shores. It is your economics that makes our politics that makes us refugees in your countries” (qtd. in Kalra, Kaur, and Hutynk 134).

Similarly, Virinder S Kalr, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk write that “At the nexus of these processes is a conflation between terrorists, Muslims and asylum-seekers/refugees” (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutynk 6). Just as the war on terror has allowed for the maintenance of dominated political order and the protection of corrupt regimes, it has also allowed for the regulation and cover-up of transnational labor. It has created a means by which to force populations to move across political boundaries and to require them to sacrifice their rights in order to put food on the table. Likewise, by labeling all those who resist such a system as terrorists, the war on terror provides a means by which to reinforce the labor system: put people in exploitive jobs; if they will not go, label them as terrorists and either deport them or imprison them. Unfortunately, there is little interest in most education and media systems to explore the relationship between economics and
terrorism. This, then, is the true nature of Ricky’s white identity: unawareness. Unawareness of his racially marked advantage. Unawareness of the suffering of immigrants. Unawareness of the extent of violence and oppression in the world. This is what, like Reza, makes him typically British.

In this way, White Boy appears to cross the multiethnic diaspora of Shades with the multinational diaspora of 9 Parts of Desire, as well as the face of the oppressor in Back of the Throat, and the dreams of aspiration of Amreeka, Sodhi, and Menezes. Sadly, in that mix, with all those experiences and locales placed side-by-side, tragedy occurred, as it does in so many parts of the world every day. However, in the narrative, Gupta provides a glimpse of what an alternative might look like, when Kabir, Shaz, Zara, and Ricky gather on stage together to mourn Victor as the play closes.

Kalra, Kaur, and Hutynk write that “tolerance is not much if we start from a degree of inequality hitherto equivalent to the worst humanity has devised. Recognition and tolerance of difference implies a notion of the norm, of the centre. Even a decentred centre, one that is also a margin, the margin of the margins, retains the centre as the privileged site from which tolerance is deployed and difference is defined” (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutynk 137). What Gupta understands is that, though diasporic opportunities in a transnational world are constituted from many ideological, personal, political, and geographic sites—not merely a Middle-Eastern/Islamic-Western binary—mere diversity alone will not save the world. The center has to be shifted and expanded in order to allow more in and to allow them to interrogate a system that creates an equally diverse array of oppressions for the diverse bodies on stage.
In summer 2002, the paths of war crisscrossed American public discourse. The war in Afghanistan that followed 9/11 had continued for over half a year, the early bombings and country songs having begun to turn into the long struggle that continues until this day. And the Bush Administration was beginning to lay the groundwork of lies and misinformation that would form the justification for invading Iraq. Meanwhile, Naomi Wallace led a group of six playwrights, including Kia Corthron, Tony Kushner, Robert O’Hara, Lisa Schlesinger, and Betty Shamieh, into occupied Palestine to meet with theater artists there and learn about the conditions under which Palestinian artists and people worked and lived during the Second Intifada. The following year, *American Theatre* published a series of responses from the playwrights, remarkable in the different ways in which they constructed the narratives of their contacts with occupied Palestine. Tony Kushner, for one, filtered the experience through an analysis of his Jewish American identity, with considerable attention to the copy of Gershom Scholem’s letters that he carried with him, concluding, “Because I went with a diverse group of people, I saw things I might have missed, and because I am a Jew I think I saw things others didn’t see, and I learned a lot about how ideology and history both open your eyes and blind you. I long to return to this great and terrible place” (Corthron, et. al. 31). Similarly, in a comparison of human rights abuses against Palestinians and his own African American experience, Robert O’Hara wrote the word “I” fifty-one times in responding to the conditions of Palestinians (31). And Palestinian American Betty Shamieh created parallel narratives between her own life growing up in America and the life she didn’t feel she would be strong enough to live had her parents stayed in
Ramallah. In conclusion, she wrote, “And yet I went. The cost of ignoring what is happening there—and ignoring how those happenings affect the stability of the entire world—is unbearable” (71). In not ignoring the plight of the Palestinians, Shamieh does not discuss any specific Palestinian experiences, leaving her entire narrative an abstract discussion of closed schools and demonstrations. This is not to say that any of these are invalid responses. Personal responses to traumatic conditions are greatly varied in form and substance. However, they are a stark contrast to the closing narrative in the article, that by Naomi Wallace. She is the only one of the writers to use an Arabic word, referencing debka, a traditional dance; the only one to draw from the literary heritage of Palestine, quoting now-deceased poet Mahmoud Darwish; and one of only two, alongside Lisa Schlesinger, to quote someone that the group encountered, providing the words of a twelve-year-old girl that told Wallace, “Yes, I throw stones at tanks. But I would rather play…When I grow up, I want to be a doctor” (71). Perhaps this is why Wallace wrote not only of her reaction as an American, but her obligation as an American:

To visit the Occupied Territories, the West Bank and Gaza as theatre writers is not simply an exercise in forging links between ourselves and the Palestinians. Rather, it is to realize that we, as Americans, are, on an intensely intimate level, already fused, through the overt involvement of our government, with the history of these people. The challenge, then, is to recognize this, and ultimately to do something about it that makes a motion in the direction of that long hard struggle for peace…We are not, I thank the gods, only ourselves and our own personal experience. We are also what happens to one another. (71)

There is much to commend in such a statement, both in its departure from the inward focused statements of Wallace’s fellow travelers—and the inward focused writing of much American
theater—and in her commitment to making Americans aware of their role in perpetuating the occupation of Palestine and all of its itinerant sufferings. Additionally, the idea that “We are also what happens to one another” would seem like a *modus operandi* for the playwright, whose oeuvre stretches not just from performances around the world, but also to the American-Mexican border to the wars in Iraq and Palestine to the struggle of union organizers. As such, Wallace’s work, particularly *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East*—and the ideas that support it—serve as a strong example of what it means to be a meaningfully transnational artist.

Of course, such an analysis first requires an examination of deployments of the term “transnational,” as well as how these concepts have been applied to explorations of contemporary theatrical production. With this done, it will be possible to see that Wallace’s theatrical practice moves beyond notions of international economic movement toward an argument for an intimate understanding of a diverse range of lives, and a personal contact—both in artistic and activist engagements—between those lives.

**What It Means to Be Transnational**

In its most basic sense, the term “transnational” is not the subject of much debate. As Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden write, “[T]he transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nation. Key to transnationalism is the recognition of the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence” (2). While this would imply that one aspect of transnationalism is the various multinational systems of economic, political, and communicative arrangements that make up the contemporary era, John Carlos Rowe also notes that the concept of transnationalism has come to include “a critical view of historically specific late modern or postmodern practices of globalizing production,
marketing, distribution, and consumption for neocolonial ends” (qtd. in Harding). Essentially, the transnational consists of both the multinational influences on contemporary life and the multinational resistances to them, globalization and globalization protests, the “war on terror,” and the international resistance to it.\(^1\) In the realm of arts, much early scholarship on transnationalism came from the realm of film studies, which existed at both the intersection the economic and political debates over influences of transnationalism. As Ezra and Rowden write, “Cinema has from its inception been transnational, circulating more or less freely across borders and utilizing international personnel. This practice has continued from the era of Chaplin, Hitchcock, and Fritz Lang up to contemporary directors like Ang Lee, Mira Nair, and Alfonso Cuarón” (2). Additionally, in the present moment, this movement of capital and labor—as well as alternative and far-reaching distribution, ranging from Netflix in America to meticulously archived pirated DVD stores in Amman—has been expedited and expanded, and, alongside it has developed an alternative cinema—by artists such as Ken Loach, Alfonso Cuarón, and Jafar Panahi that explore the political, economic, and cultural impacts of such movements.

However, as an embodied art form, theater does not transport with the expediency of a DVD, and discussions of transnationalism have taken on a different shape in theater studies, focusing more on the latter question of representational concerns than the former of economic and political structures in the production of art.\(^2\) To the extent that structural elements have been discussed, they have tended to focus on lines of influence. One form of this, as noted in the

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1 Pro-national anti-immigrant movements, such as the British National Party or the Militiamen in America would appear to be the exception to this, both in their attempt to solidify national sovereignty and their racially and nationally exclusive constituency. Internationally funded and dispersed nationalist resistance, such as Hamas and Hizbollah, would seem to stand at the intersection of these two traditions.

2 Broadway and the West End would seem the obvious exceptions to this, but even when their economics are discussed in terms of shows transferring between New York and London, they are rarely considered within a broad-based international economic system, even despite the tourist contingents in their audiences, perhaps with the exception of Ryan Claycomb’s analysis of the Daniel Radcliffe production of *Equus*. And even this is more about a standard process of commodifying the avant-garde, or what Claycomb labels “a late-capitalist economic system of transnational media integration and commodification” (100).
previous chapter, is the flawed assumption that diasporic art inherently represents transnational experiences. Meanwhile, some scholarship has attempted to constitute transnationalism in terms of international lines of influence on contemporary artists. The collection *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, for example, argues for a decentering of the avant-garde outside of the European experience, suggesting that “the first- and second-wave avant-gardes (pre- and post-World War II) were always already a transnational phenomenon; and that the performative gestures of these avant-gardes were culturally hybrid forms that emanated simultaneously from a wide diversity of sources rather than from a European center” (Harding and Rouse 15). In the same collection, Marvin Carlson advocates for the necessity of understanding the indigenous influence on Middle Eastern theater, rather than merely looking for European influences. All of this is, undoubtedly, important scholarship in terms of challenging theater scholars to reconsider the Western-centered biases that influence their understanding of theater history and the nature of contemporary theater. However, none of it asks what it means to think transnationally, rather than to merely be influenced by multiple traditions.

There is very little attempt to use theater, as Yan Haiping argues for in her discussion of Asian theater, to explore how “globalization dictated by capital can be traced and contextualized through the various social formations of the human lives that it changes and interconnects and how those specific social beings actively inhabit the present global change that not only conditions their functions but also threatens to overdetermine the very constitution of their existence and signification” (226). While there is some theater work that attempts to do explore the globalized nature of economic relations, the nature of live performance, and the economics of performance, often do not allow critiques of transnational economics to function transnationally. For instance, when the Young Vic stages Clare Bayley’s *The Container*, a play about refugees
attempting to smuggle themselves into Britain, inside a shipping container on a street in London, a powerful critique of those abandoned by the international flow of capital is present. At the same time, in form, the work presents a British writer, theater, and cast discussing issues of British concern in front of a British audience—save interlopers like myself—on a British road. Meanwhile, many works that travel internationally with international casts—such as Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*—replicate the worst colonial practices and stereotypes. In the end, most critical discussions of the transnational content of theatrical works have tended to merely use the term as a means of discussing cross-border content. In this context, Sara L. Warner has discussed Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus* as a transnational work because it deals with the transnational transport—both past and present, alive and dead—of Saartjie Baartman’s (“The Hottentot Venus”) body (181). More germane to this discussion, Jerry Wasserman writes of the Canadian play *Ali and Ali and the aXes of Evil* as “transnational agitprop” because of the diasporic nature of the stars and its engagement with the American influence on Canadian culture, as well as the Canadian resistance to such influence. These works all clearly contain transnational content, as well as critiques of transnationalized forms of exploitation, but there is nothing particularly transnational about their form or the audiences that they perform before, although *Ali and Ali* did at least go on the road, with a variable script. Ultimately, if critiques of local political and economic policies are to meaningfully involve the effects of those policies on distant peoples, there must be some way for theater to meaningfully contact those peoples.

**Dangerous Border Crossings**

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3 This is not meant to stand as a critique of the play itself, which is a beautiful, heartbreaking work that deserves to be more wildly performed and traveled. But, as will be discussed, below, it is a question of how we formulate our sense of the Other.

4 Unfortunately, as a Canadian play, the wealth of things that could be said about this work stand outside the scope of this study, though Wasserman’s article does provide an insightful examination of the now-published play.
The challenge of how to connect distant experiences returns this discussion to Naomi Wallace, an artist whose work has attempted to overcome the physical and mental borders she inherited. Years before the previously discussed trip to Palestine, she crafted what remains her most famous play, *In the Heart of America*, the story of a white American and a Palestinian American soldier during the first Gulf War, which touches on issues of race, class, and sexuality not often mixed on American stages, where Palestinian bodies are rarely present in any form. However, this play remains within the bounds of those works discussed above that exist as transnational merely in their content. More recently, her play *Twenty-One Positions, a Cartographic Dream of the Middle East* involved working with Jewish and Palestinian artists to construct “a kind of Brechtian musical about the illegal Wall,” as Wallace explains it, thereby moving toward a more transnational process to match the content of the work (100). However, it is in a work between the two of these, the lesser known *The Fever Chart*, that Wallace has embodied the idea of critical transnationality in artistic production, and has engaged the risks of such work in its performance history.

In terms of content, *The Fever Chart* represents a true attempt to think across the fault lines of conflict in the Middle East. Consisting of three “visions” of the Middle East, the work has two short plays about Palestinian-Israeli relations, and one monologue by an Iraqi man about the devastation of his country. Given this material, it begins at a place of trying, as will be discussed below, to work across the ideological and physical boundaries in the world in an attempt to explore the human face of suffering. Additionally, like *In the Heart of America*, it is a rare American work that chooses to juxtapose Palestinian and Iraqi conditions of occupations. In fact, its ideology—though not its representations of Israelis—stands much closer to the works found in Cairo than in New York, where Palestinian and Iraqi sufferings have historically been
severed from one another. Perhaps this is why it is one of the few plays about the “war on terror” to have been performed in all three of my sites of research, and the only one from that group to not have been adapted from previous works. The work, and the artist, who splits her time between America and Britain, and traveled to Egypt for the Cairo production, exemplifies the idea of a personalized transnational critique that knows the spaces in which those forgotten by neoliberal globalization exist, while the production history of The Fever Chart demonstrates the challenges of trying to communicate such knowledge.

In order to engage these challenges, one of the visions in The Fever Chart tells the seemingly impossible story of an Israeli woman that has been given the lungs of a Palestinian youth killed by an Israeli soldier. Though Wallace’s play speaks to a seemingly impossible coming together of her characters, the work was based on an actual event, as Nehad Selaiha noted in her review of the Cairo performance: “[I]n November 2005, the parents of 12-year old Ahmed Khatib who was shot in the head by Israeli soldiers during a raid on Jenin refugee camp, agreed to have his heart, liver, kidneys and lungs transplanted into six Israelis.” Furthermore, The Guardian, whose story on the event was projected between plays in the Cairo production, wrote that the Arab family involved said “that peace and a desire to alleviate the suffering of others was uppermost in their minds. But looking exhausted and still stunned by the twin demands of Ahmed's death and the Israeli embrace, they also speak of their decision as an act of resistance” (qtd. In Selaiha).

In Wallace’s play, the seemingly impossible moves to another level, when the father, Mourid, of the dead boy, Ahmed, meets the woman, Tanya, who has Ahmed’s lungs inside her in the waiting room of a clinic in West Jerusalem. There, he mysteriously unravels details of his

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5 This is the distinction between Wallace’s work and that of British-Kuwaiti playwright and director Sulayman al-Bassan, whose Arab adaptations of Shakespeare have received global attention in recent years and can be read as being related to the recent wars, though that is hardly his only concern.
son’s life beside what he knows of Tanya’s life, moving between asking her, “How often do you stay behind to lock up? To play with the stethoscope? To talk with a patient after hours, pretending you can be of service?” After all of this, he tells her of his son’s death:

MOURID: No. I do not want to hurt you. I want to tell you about my son.

When he was twelve the IDF gave him a broom. They made him sweep the dirt from their ranks. The children had been throwing dirt.

TANYA: How innocent.

MOURID: The back of the head and pelvis. Your soldiers shot him twice.

TANYA: Why?

MOURID: They said he was carrying a gun.

TANYA: Was he?

MOURID: No. (37)

There are many ways to write about the occupation of Palestine, and many plays—though perhaps not as often in America—have been written on the violence inherent in occupation. Few have shaped as intimate of a metaphor as having an Israeli living through the air drawn through the lungs of a Palestinian killed by the Israeli military; few are willing to write that an Israeli lives through drawing breath from a Palestinian. Even fewer would have such a character look into the eyes of the father whose son gives her breath to live. Tragically, this intimacy, the speaking of the child’s death, is broken when Mourid tries to explain to Tanya that his son’s lungs were transplanted inside of her, an idea that Tanya works hard to reject. Mourid then desperately explains to her the situation in detail:

The donor organs had to be transplanted within six hours after being removed.

While you were under general anesthesia, the surgeon made an incision across
your chest, beneath the breast area and removed your lungs. Then the surgeon placed the new lungs into your empty chest cavity and connected the pulmonary artery of the new lungs into your vessels and airway. Drainage tubes were inserted to drain air, fluid and blood out of your chest for several days to allow the lungs to reexpand. With oxygen. Sweet, cold oxygen. And here you are, beautiful Tanya. *(Beat)* My son is inside you. (45)

Initially, Tanya responds to this story with outright denial, returning to the narrative she had been given, telling Mourid, “You are a grieving, pathetic, gibbering lunatic. Her name, my donor’s name, was Amira Goldensohn” (45). As Mourid continues to insist that it is Ahmed’s lungs inside Tanya, she turns to revulsion, spitting on him, and later telling him, “Had your son’s lungs been inside me, I am sure, absolutely sure, that I would have rejected them” (46). Finally, she attempts to disgust Mourid, declaring, “When I laugh, your son laughs. When I sing, your son sings…But that would also mean your son was present last night. That’s why I am especially tired today. I was awake till four A.M. I picked a stranger up after work. A sweet, eager young man. He fucked me so hard I thought he’d break me in half,” continuing on after Mourid tries to interrupt her, “Don’t worry. Things went smoothly. Your son gave me good air when I sucked cock. Good Jewish cock” (50). In this way, Tanya attempts to invert the intimacy expressed by Mourid, using the fact of Ahmed’s lungs not to show the closeness of their lives, but to try to sicken and repel Mourid. Just as the bullet from the Israeli soldier took the beauty of Ahmed’s life to try to stop Palestinian resistance, so too does Tanya try to use the beauty of the gift she was given to try to end Mourid’s words. However, just as the Israeli state has not been able to expel all the Palestinian bodies from its system, no matter how many have been killed, Tanya inevitably learns that she must also depend on Mourid:
(Tanya stands very still. Her breathing has again become difficult, constricted. She takes short breaths and tries to smooth her breathing.)

You mustn’t fight the constriction. You must welcome it. Welcome it and it will pass. The short breaths you take are rigid and only make it worse.

(Only now does Mourid turn around.)

You must slow your breath down. Let it gather its force again. Like this.

(Mourid breathes in a long, slow breath.)

As though the air has become fluid and you are drinking it in.

(Mourid breathes in again, demonstrating.)

TANYA: I can’t. (Beat) I can’t.

MOURID: You must listen to me. You must follow my breath.

TANYA: Why do you want to help me?

MOURID: Because your name is Tanya Langer.

(Tanya shakes her head no.)

Because this is not the only world.

(Mourid and Tanya now face off, a good distance between them. It seems they are now in a different dimension, speaking to each other across a divide. They speak to one another slowly, formally).

TANYA: Mourid Kamal. Why do you want to help me?

MOURID: Because you are. My son.

(TANYA looks at Mourid. Mourid raises his head slightly; Tanya copies him. It is clear that he is leading this breathing lesson.)
The remarkable aspect of the work is that Wallace understands at once the power dynamic in play in the Israeli occupation of Palestine, but, at the same time, that on either side of that dynamic are human beings intimately related to one another, at the most intrinsic of levels. Thus, while Tanya is dependent on Mourid in order to draw breaths, it is her choice to choose to follow his directions—and for five years, she lived without any awareness of him. Mourid understands what is necessary for him and Tanya to live peacefully together, but Tanya alone is the one responsible for choosing to overcome her biases, set her structured power aside, and accepting Mourid’s aid in her ability to breathe, to live. And until she chooses to risk her own self, she has no hope of healing herself.

This sort of intimacy between the occupier and the occupied is at the heart of all the other visions within The Fever Chart. In “Retreating World,” an older piece from Wallace repackaged in the triptych, an Iraqi man delivers a monologue that weaves his love of books, his hobby of raising pigeons, and the devastation that war and sanctions have left behind in his nation at the turn of the millennium. Early on, his advice on raising pigeons dovetails into the state of Iraq after nearly a decade of sanctions: “Considering the times there is only one real rule to keeping pigeons. And this rule, this golden rule, is not in this book—never name a pigeon after a member of your family or a dear friend. (Beat) For two reasons: pigeons have short lives—and when a pigeon named after an uncle dies, this can be disconcerting. And second: these times are dangerous for pigeons—they can be caught and eaten” (58). This style of mixing the intimacy of books and birds from his personal life with the violence unleashed on an entire nation continues throughout the play, such as when Ali begins to speak of the Gulf War, saying,

We hid in bunkers for most of those weeks. Cursing Saddam when our captain was out. Cursing the Brits and the Yanks the rest of the time. And I missed my
birds. But birds were prohibited in the bunkers. Prohibited. Prohibited by the laws of nations as were the fuel-air explosive bombs, the napalm—Shhh!—the cluster and antipersonnel weapons. Prohibited, as were the BLU-82 bombs, a fifteen-thousand-pound device—Shut up!—capable of incinerating every living thing, flying or grounded, within hundreds of yards...And me, I missed my birds. The way they looked at me, their eyes little pieces of peace sailing my way. (61).

Similarly, after Ali eats part of one of his books, he declares,

Books can also, in extreme times, be used as sustenance. But such eating makes for a parched throat. Many mornings I wake and I am thirsty. I turn on the taps but there is no running water. A once-modern city of three million people, with no running water for years now. The toilets are dry because we have no sanitation. Sewage pools in the street. When we wish to relieve ourselves, we squat beside the dogs. At night, we turn on the lights to read the books we have forgotten we have sold, but there is no electricity. (64)

Perhaps it is too cliché—though no less true—to say that the personal is political, but, given that, what these passages certainly reveal is how deep into the intimate corners of individual lives political and economic devastation can reach. The last section particularly underscores this idea, as Baghdad had once been one of the major centers of Middle Eastern arts and culture, with a remarkably high literacy rate, before the wars began: “In 1989, school enrollment in Iraq was higher than the average rate for all developing countries, but over the last decade, the number of elementary school dropouts has increased by more than 30 percent” (“Iraq—Truth”). And though the sanctions regime and wars have weakened the Iraqi educational system, UNICEF still estimates total adult literacy between 2003 and 2008 at 74 percent (“Iraq—Statistics”). Being
forced to eat a book in a culture that values literature so much, and for a man who loves books so profoundly, becomes a stark marker of the degree to which Iraqi society, down to the most personal and desperate levels, had been undercut by the sanctions during the nineties. In many ways, the psychological trauma and the inability to return to a normal life also represent the characteristics of PTSD discussed in Chapter Eight. For Ali, the violence and devastation have become the normative structures, rather than the artifacts of a life he had once known. Perhaps this makes sense, as he continues to explain his experiences as a soldier:

And then we walked towards the American unit to surrender, our arms raised beside seven hundred other men...As we walked towards them—this is documented—the commander of the U.S. unit fired, at one man—an anti-tank missile, a missile meant to pierce armor. At one man. The rest of us, arms still raised, stopped walking. I remember. I remember...I could not. I could not recognize. My friend Samir. A piece of his spine stuck upright in the sand. His left hand blown so high in the air it was still falling. Then they opened fire on the rest of us. A bullet hit me in the back as I ran. Out of hundreds, thousands in that week, a handful of us survived. I lived. Funny. That I am still here. The dead are dead. The living, we are the ghosts. We no longer say good-bye to one another. With the pencils we do not have we write our names so the future will know we were here. So that the past will know we are coming. (66)

As Ali moves into the heart of his trauma, even the memories of the books and birds from better days disappear from his monologue, replaced only by violence and loss, by the devastation that has steadily pushed all other beauties out of his life, by the death of the man who had earlier said,
“If love is in pieces, then he was a piece of love” (62). A piece of love, turned to pieces of human devastation by the violence of war.

Too often, discussions of war violence are separated from a direct understanding of what that violence entails. The number of bodies are given in an abstract frame, one that does not see the inability to feed or educate one’s children any longer, the inability to bring a glass of water to an ailing parent, the inability to walk down the road beside one’s lover, the inability to love. In “The Retreating World,” Wallace brings such personal details painfully close to her audience, providing the destruction brought by large weapons on the smallest, most private level. And the play also ends in a moment of intimacy, when Ali picks up a bucket and holds it up for the audience, declaring, “These are the bones of those who have died, from the avenue of palms, from the land of dates. I have come here to give them to you for safekeeping. (Beat) Catch them. If you can” (67). As he throws the bucket out over the audience, they are not met with bones of dead Iraqis, but “hundreds of white feathers” (68). Instead of fully horrifying an audience that helped construct the characters’ suffering—Egypt, Britain, and America having all participated in the first Gulf War—he, like Mourid, provides a gift of beauty, a moment to breathe and hope together, to know that the space between the lives of the oppressor and the oppressed are thinner than the space between feathers falling from the sky.

And this also holds true in the third, and most imaginary, vision in The Fever Chart, “A State of Innocence.” This final, though typically first performed, vision tells the story of an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian woman meeting in a zoo in Rafah, a city in the Gaza Strip against the Egyptian border, alongside the architect of the zoo. As with “Between This Breath and You,” “A State of Innocence” tells the story of a meeting between two intimately related
people from either side of the Israeli occupation. And, once again, it begins with tension between the two parties, brought by their preconceptions of one another:

UM HISHAM: Go away, Yuval.

YUVAL (Threatening): Hey. How do you know my name, lady. Remember that (Quotes) “The one who comes to kill us, we shall rise early and kill him.” I’m not afraid of you. Are you a terrorist?


YUVAL: Don’t get playful with me. You want to throw me in the sea.

UM HISHAM: I just might. But I can’t get to the sea. Seventeen and a half checkpoints keep me from it. (9)

Set in the middle of the Second Intifada, the play begins with the tension between the people on either side of that struggle, tensions that cause a young soldier to believe that even a middle-aged mother is a threat to him because she is Palestinian. However, the structure of occupied violence returns when UM HISHAM explains to YUVAL how she knows who he is:

UM HISHAM: You came to my house in Rafah at 5:30 A.M., with two other soldiers. You broke down the door. Your friends found no weapons in my house. How could they? We had none. Your friends were pissed-off so they began to beat my husband. He was on the ground. They kicked him in the chest seven times. If Asma had been there she would have counted. But then you stopped them. Why did you stop them?

(Yuval just looks at her.)
I was so grateful that I made you a cup of tea. And you accepted. You stood in the hallway, the dawn of light from the broken door rushing past you. You put the cup to your lips. (Beat) A single bullet from a sniper. To the head. You went down on one knee, still holding the cup. You looked at me as though it were a joke—all of it—that moment, the tea spilling across your thighs, the orange birds on the tiled floor, my face so close to your face. You said—

YUVAL: Don’t. I don’t want to know what I said.

UM HISHAM: You said—

YUVAL: I don’t want to know.

UM HISHAM: “Hold me.” And you kept saying it.

YUVAL (Quietly): Hold me. Hold me. Hold me.

UM HISHAM: Three minutes. It took you three minutes to die. Everything I have despised, for decades—the uniform, the power, the brutality, the inhumanity—and I held it in my arms. I held you, Yuval. (Beat) But it should have been your mother. We should hold our own children when they die. (23)

Um Hisham continues on to explain that because Yuval died in her house, the Israeli military bulldozed the house and arrested her husband, and that the zoo they are in is the one that lives on in their minds, where she can visit Yuval as she visits her daughter. In this way, “A State of Innocence” also explores the closeness between the occupier and the occupied, and how their lives, and deaths, are inextricably linked to one another and are even tied together after death. And, as with the other plays, it provides an image of the oppressed providing comfort to the oppressor, showing humanity in spite of the occupation, though, in this play, the Israeli soldier had also shown a moment of compassion to Um Hisham, a moment that would cost him his life,
as crossing the borders of political divide, sadly, too often does. Despite the risk, it is only in those moments of crossing, in the creative transgressions, in the most intimate forms of transnational community that a better world can be imagined, that that vision can exist, in the mind, on stage, or in life. The inverse of this is an idea that Wallace understands when she states, “What could be more intimate or personal than the fact that we get up in the morning, kiss our loved ones, go to work, come home, pay our taxes—and those taxes from our daily labor are used to kill you and you and you, and I never saw your face nor knew your name” (Wallace, “On Writing”). And the resistance to such violence needs to take an equally personal form.

The Price of Protest

Unfortunately, writing such visions comes with its own cost as well. As Wallace has explained about attempts to stage her collaborative work Twenty-One Positions, a Cartographic Dream of the Middle East, “[B]efore Lisa, Abed [the co-writers], and I had set foot in the Guthrie Theatre, the dramaturg there accused us of writing in a way that supported terrorism. This is a ridiculous and censorious charge” (MacDonald 100). She also explains, “There is very little space in the U.S. to talk about the Palestinians as other than a people made up almost entirely of terrorists. The conversation about Israel and Palestine is the most censored conversation in the U.S. today. And it’s not an easy conversation to have in Britain either” (100).\(^6\)

Furthermore, it is not in the West alone that this conversation has met challenges. When The Fever Chart was first performed at the American University in Cairo, four of the actors in the play came to the front of the stage as Wallace and director Frank Bradley took the stage for the post-show Q&A. The four actors rejected the play for, as they saw it, equating the oppressor

\(^6\) The production would eventually be staged at Fordham University in 2008, instead of the Guthrie.
with the oppressed and creating lives in a vacuum, finally stating “no coexistence without preceding existence.” Interestingly, the critical responses to the performance took a decidedly different tone. Writing in the *Daily News Egypt*, Joseph Fahim stated, “The four actors’ statement and the criticism Wallace was bombarded with reflects an intolerance for any work that portrays the ‘enemy’ in a non-barbaric light. The Israeli characters never appear sympathetic, and that’s one of the very few dramatic flaws of the play. Wallace doesn’t offer any kind of resolution, or ‘reconciliation,’ for her characters, which renders the actors’ statement all the more puzzling.” Meanwhile, Nehad Selaiha noted in her weekly column for *al-Ahram Weekly*, after critiquing the sloganeering and simple answers that often pass as political theater, “That some of the audience found it hard to swallow such a message is, perhaps, understandable and could be predicted. One wonders if there ever will come a time when such brave plays would be properly appreciated…They [Wallace, Bradley, and the AUC] gave me a taste of real political theatre as I understand it: challenging, disorienting and thought provoking.” It would also seem strange that, given the AUC’s upper-class demographic, the students did not have a problem with their university training the heirs to Egypt’s political and economic elite who remain complicit in the occupation. After all, the show ran just after Israel imposed its blockade on Gaza, which only remained effective so long as the Egyptian state allowed it.7 Meanwhile, *The Jewish Chronicle*, writing of the British production, ended with the note that “plays about this conflict have to deliver more than a depiction of mutual suffering” (Nathan). And the American press largely chooses to ignore most stagings of Wallace’s work outright, to the extent that non-academic American theaters ever choose to stage her plays in the first place, as the

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7 Gamal Mubarak, the son, and once presumed heir, of ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is one example of many with power who studied at the AUC.
Guthrie decided against. Inevitably, the cost of being a bridge between cultures is being trampled on…in both directions.

But this does not mean that the work is without value. As noted above, *The Fever Chart* always maintains a clear structure of understanding the difference between occupier and occupied, while, at the same time, showing the intimate connections between human beings on either side of that line. True, this may be hard for many to view, but, at the same time, it is impossible to end such structures without understanding that the ideological failures that create them are human. Just as the suffering should not be disembodied, neither should the structures that create oppression. They are equally human, and must be understood as such.

At one point in “Between This Breath and You,” Mourid tells Tanya, “Did you know, Tanya—may I call you Tanya?—that wind has no sound? What makes the sound are the things it touches—branch, cliff, roof. All that rushing is the contact between one thing and another. Without that meeting point between two worlds, the harshest wind is silent” (Wallace 34). So too are abstract forms of political resistance, those that do not understand the intimate details of the lives they mean to help, equally voiceless. True, in the contact that creates voice there is friction, and there are moments of tension. However, in the silencings of the Guthrie, of the Egyptian state, of those who would not see those whom they oppose (or, in some cases, support) as human, there is also no chance for progress, for a better means of living together. It is only when transnational humanism risks the pain of intimacy and the burns of friction that it will have a voice, a hope, and a possibility for a better world.
Conclusion
The Space Between Understanding and Empathy

There is a country on my tongue

a small world between my heartbeats.

Strangers inside me that understand

the strangeness of strange things,

that understand they are not strangers
to each other but it seems strange to

others that they belong together, as if

we can refuse ourselves ourselves.

Words slide down my throat

like velvet rivers and outside

a tiny echo is calling me

as I travel and move

from one continent to the next,

move, to be whole.

---Nathalie Handal, “Strangers Inside Me”

On a good day, it takes about twenty hours to travel between Lower Manhattan and Marka, a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Amman, Jordan. The process is fairly straightforward. You take the A line—and eventually an overpriced shuttle—out to JFK Airport. After a couple of hours of security and waiting, there is a flight across the Atlantic, perhaps a
long layover in Heathrow, with its shiny terminals that were not particularly well designed for
sleeping, and then another flight to Amman, where, if you possess the proper passport and look,
there is a 20 Jordanian Dinar visa and a cursory series of questions. Outside the airport, the taxis
are few and far between, but all too happy to charge an obscene rate into the city. You need only
tell one, preferably in Arabic, that you desire to go to Airport Circle in Marka—there is another
airport—and the taxi will travel around the southern and eastern edges of the city. At the circle,
you can walk toward the flashing lights of the shopping area and find the best konafa in Amman
that a guidebook will never recommend, or you can turn down into the neighborhoods behind the
stores, where scattered among the houses live a pocket of the one million Iraqi refugees now
present in Jordan, depending on who’s data one is to believe.

A day of travel, but, judging from the lack of foreign languages and non-Arab bodies on
the streets of Marka and the 43,000 Iraqi refugees that the United States has resettled since 2004,
the two neighborhoods stand a lifetime apart for most people. Yet they are inextricably linked.
After all, while there are many consequences to the attacks of 9/11, not least among them the
loss of lives and the trauma inflicted upon New York City, one of the least justifiable and most
tragic was that it provided the Bush Administration with the justification for one of its primary
foreign policy goals: the invasion of Iraq. That Saddam Hussein had no ties to al-Qaeda—there
is little love lost between a secular dictatorship and an Islamist militant organization with global
ambitions—that Iraq posed no threat to the United States, or that the United States had a rare
opportunity to redefine its sorted history of Middle Eastern engagements in a more positive
manner did not matter. The regime was to be toppled, the oil fields opened, and the government
democratized in a pro-American way. And so, as Naomi Wallace and her cohort traveled to
Palestine, as the Egyptian state relished the “war on terror” rhetoric’s construction of a narrative
to marginalize dissent, as artists in London and Cairo and New York searched for responses to the violences in each of their cities and to the continuing war in Afghanistan, the Bush and Blair Administrations searched for their own rhetorics, their own narratives, their own stories to tell.

The images of this story, in the official narrative, are all familiar: Colin Powell at the UN, the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue, George W. Bush declaring “Mission Accomplished.” But the actual face of the war has often been lost in the discussion. What is the image for the 4,474 American soldiers that have been killed? And how does one even begin to conceive of the possibility that well over one million Iraqis have died since the war began? And does anyone even count the bodies in Afghanistan? Lower Manhattan and Marka are linked, not through fate or a direct line, but because the grieving families in the former became the excuse to create the grieving refugees in the latter.

For me, they are also linked on a personal level. Through a strange twist of fate and scheduling, my last day of field research for this study found me in New York City on the eighth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Eight years before, planes had ripped through a sun-drenched morning to kill 2,977 people, and eight years later I stood in the rain listening to the names of those people, trying to find meaning in the knowledge that, had they not died, I would not have spent the previous sixteen months of my life traveling the world for this study. In St Paul’s Chapel that day, in the historic church where George Washington prayed before his inauguration and where rescue workers at Ground Zero sought rest and food and comfort on the days after the attack, the Episcopalian Reverend spoke of the need for forgiveness, both out of religious obligation and for healing. Outside, from the “truthers” on the adjacent street to the wars that raged on—and that we continue to be told are for those who died in the once-adjacent buildings—it seemed as if the world was growing harder.
Around the fencing for the perpetually soon-to-be memorial, and beside the fire station, sits the museum to the events of 9/11, complete with videos and models, the missing person fliers once put up on the streets of New York, and pieces of the metal that remained, as well as a string of quotes responding to the events. One of these is from New York poet Hettie Jones, who wrote, “We are breathing the dead, taking them into our lungs as living we had taken them into our arms.” Perhaps too we need also to breathe their stories, to tell them, not for cheap political gain, but so that we might someday live in a world where we don’t ask what forms of collateral loss are acceptable for economic and political self-interest.

Nearly a year later, within days of when I would sit down to write these words, I found myself in Marka, an area where I had spent what time I could during a summer in Jordan teaching English to Iraqi refugees, as well as talking with them and trying to hear their stories. On this particular day, I was shooting a series of interviews in Arabic, asking them about the conditions for refugees in Jordan, about their lives in Iraq and in Jordan, their dreams for the future, and other similar questions. At the end, I asked each one what he thought Americans needed to know about Iraq. Most simply said, “It’s a beautiful country.” However, the oldest of the group talked of how the sectarian violence of recent years had not existed previously in Iraq’s history, and that now there is no longer security in his country. Similarly, another told me that, while he did not like Saddam Hussein, life in Iraq was worse after the Americans arrived. When I sat the camera down afterwards, the group turned to me and said they had their own questions for me. The questions ranged from job opportunities in America to the treatment of Muslims in America to discussions of economics and politics. While in America protests raged over the construction of mosques from Lower Manhattan to Tennessee, the concerns of the Iraqi Muslims I sat with were not that different than the concerns of the American Christians I had sat with in
St. Paul: how do I have a good education, a good job, a good life for my family? How do I live peacefully and with hope in this world? Appropriately, in that church in Lower Manhattan, there are scores of origami cranes, with the note, “Symbolic of how St. Paul’s brought together people of all nations and religions in its ministry of compassion and reconciliation, these origami peace cranes represent a fraction of the thousands of these Shinto offerings we received from school children and other groups throughout Japan—the most precious of which came from survivors of the W.W. II bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

There is, in the end, a world of political and economic exploitation, where politicians and businessmen hold meetings in locations like Sharm el Sheikh and Dubai, or behind walls of police in Toronto and Genoa and Pittsburgh. And there is a world of the scattered victims of the exploitations of this transnational system, who have been trained to wage war on one another, to think only within the systems they have inherited, rather than across the borders that have been constructed for them. Despite this, it is only in the creative moments of transgression, of subversive transnationality—of sitting with refugees in far flung locations, of sending messages of peace to those who might now understand your suffering, of preaching tolerance and forgiveness in the face of violence, or making theater about the issues that people are scared to speak, in the places they are scared to travel—that this alternative world can unite itself in a solidified opposition to the world it has inherited, to the world of divisions that maintain the structure of power and oppression already in place.

In *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes,

> Thoroughgoing ignorance about the ways of others is largely a privilege of the powerful. The well-traveled polyglot is as likely to be among the worst off as among the best off—as likely to be found in a shantytown as at the Sorbonne. So
cosmopolitanism shouldn’t be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association (xvii-xix).

In the abstract, this is a noble idea, in its call for a global humanity, but what this means in actual practice is never entirely clear. After all, oppressors and oppressed, occupiers and the occupied, exploiters and the exploited are already associated with one another, irrevocably. The question, after all, is not just one of movement and talk, but of where one goes and who one speaks to. For Appiah, the crux of cosmopolitan comparisons comes from the juxtaposition of the United States and Ghana, and, certainly, there is much to learn in these comparisons; at the same time, if the conversations that Appiah argues for are to have meaning, if they are to further an alternative set of associations, they have to move beyond our personal self-investments and into the spaces where our only investment is overcoming the oppression of others, even when they are not of our own self-identification. Appiah is correct in asserting that “Conversations across boundaries can be fraught, all the more so as the world grows smaller and the stakes grow larger,” but that does not make all cross-cultural engagements equal (xx). To return to the play that began this study, Talking with Terrorists, conversations with Mahmoud Abbas are not the same as those with Hamas, and neither are they the same as those in the streets of Jenin, despite the fact that all are fraught with tensions. Perhaps this is why Appiah’s arc through witchcraft and Ramadan leads not toward a world-unifying vision, as his introduction suggests, so much as a justification for buying opera tickets instead of giving money to OXFAM and UNICEF. True, this is probably the most trifling example of a broader concern that Appiah writes about, more elegantly expressed when he notes, “Cosmopolitanism is about intelligence and curiosity as well as
engagement. It requires knowing that policies that I might have supported because they protect jobs in my state or region are part of the answer. It involves seeing not just a suffering body but a wasted human life” (168). Once again, the central idea here—that policies need to be formed intelligently, so money to help people can be spent intelligently—is hard to argue with, but the question remains as to how those knowledges are formed, when, presumably, the conditions under which said children are dying are not in the opera house (though perhaps some of those who create the conditions are). Who one chooses to speak with is inevitably part and parcel of whom one chooses to struggle beside. This is not to say that intensive study of important issues is not necessary, but the political possibilities of empathy and personal understanding of the specific conditions under discussion are frighteningly undervalued in a world that many pretend is flat.

So what does this mean for theater artists, scholars, and audiences? Writing about her interview-based approach to constructing theatrical performances, Anna Deavere Smith has said, “What I’m trying to tell you is we cannot sit in our offices, in our theatres, or our classrooms and effect change” (79). In the same piece, Smith tells the story of the title character from her play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, who never actually saw her perform him on stage: “Twilight is a prophet, and he is a person who can do what we try to teach people for four years. He can speak as he thinks. He can render a poetic idea as though it were normal, because it is normal…He never came to the show that bears his name and carries his words as a major theme. We invited him several times. *I should have taken the show to him*” (89). What Smith understands is her own failure in not-creating a dialectical artistic practice. She listened to and repeated the stories she had heard, but never took those stories back into the spaces that formed them in order to continue the engagement…and that merely involved traveling across Los Angeles.
The problem is not just the narcissism of plays such as those by Christopher Shinn, but the narratological limitations on the ideas that formulate most plays, from leaving out significant segments of Afghan history that trouble the idea of Afghans as backwards to assuming that changing the president of Egypt or the United States alone will reform the structural inequalities in transnational political and economic systems—as nervousness over the current military regime in Egypt makes clear. But even when such structural problems are addressed, they are often done in an abstract quality divorced from a conversation with those affected. They know that 100,000 Iraqi women and children were killed in the war, but do not know the faces of any of them, and do not allow Iraqi voices to express that experience. And, in many cases, perhaps with the exception of a work like *Nine Parts of Desire*, they remove any possibility of self-determination for those under discussion, thereby replicating the (neo)colonialist structure that created the problem in the first place.

Of course, theater can be one of the sites for moving across those lines and resisting such ideologies. Jill Dolan elegantly describes this process when she declares, “Perhaps in these moments of communal, almost loving rest, when the flesh stops and the soul pauses, we come together, at attention and relieved, to feel utopia” (479). Later in the same discussion, she clarifies the possibilities of that utopia, writing, “I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that’s more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. I’d like to argue that such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like” (455-6). As someone who works in and studies theater, and wants to believe in a progressive alternative of human sociality, I desperately want to believe in these ideas, and on the abstract level, do.
But, as with Appiah, I find myself deeply troubled when I ask who exactly the “we” in this formation is. After all, nowhere is there a consideration of those who cannot afford theater performances—or how to reach them (or of the places where free theater is most heavily marketed to those who can most afford to pay, rather than taken to those who cannot). There is no consideration of the “we” on the other side of borders and barriers, who will never be allowed to be a part of queer performances in Austin. And there is no attempt to ask how reconstituting the “we” on stage and in the audience might reform the shape of that utopia in either performance or practice. There can be possibilities to view better means of living together in theatric performance, unquestionably. But it remains incumbent on those who make, critique, and attend those performances to constantly expand the frame that such possibilities are viewed through, and enlarge the room in which the debate occurs.

So, to return to the final chapter in this study, I find Naomi Wallace’s construction of the possibilities within theater more convincing:

For me, all theater has to do with exchanges of power, negotiations of power. Desire, sex, war, racism, sexism. These are issues of power. Love is an issue of power. Love is an issue of politics. As James Baldwin reminds us, the “inability to live is the central problem.” To be denied a world in which we can flourish in our giving of love and receiving of love is political. To be denied the freedom to touch who we want, how we want, when we want, is political. To have enough to eat, so we have the strength to make love to our beloved is also political. To hold our children in our arms and promise them all the delights and adventures of tomorrow is political. (Svich 102)
What Wallace’s construction of theater allows for is not only the possibility that theater can provide an alternative vision of a more loving world, but also that theater can—and perhaps is more likely to—play the role of maintaining the power structures that many making, attending, and writing about performance desire to critique, which is why the questions of who these practices are for and where these practices occur is essential to understanding how and why they occur.

This expansion of possibility was also the concern of former American Studies Association President Amy Kaplan, when she said, “In American studies we need to go beyond simply exposing the racism of empire and examine the dynamics by which Arabs and the religion of Islam are becoming racialized through the interplay of templates of U.S. racial codes and colonial Orientalism” (5). With the war in Afghanistan already underway, the war in Iraq impending, and the twin violations of the USA Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay already in place, Kaplan saw the work of academic scholarship as an important site of resistance to racist and imperialist policy, and she attempted to imagine this resistance in an international context, declaring, “We have the obligation to study and critique the meanings of America in their multiple dimensions, to understand the enormous power wielded in its name, its ideological and affective force, as well as its sources for resistance to empire” (10). Despite this, Kaplan never provides a face to the effect of American imperialism, nor does she imagine what America might look like when viewed from other corners of the world. True, this is a natural bias for someone addressing the ASA, but it’s also what causes Paul Giles to note in response to the address, “[I]n relation to the larger imperial discourse that frames Kaplan’s narrative, it is not entirely clear how this relationship between domestic agency and global power might be modulated within an international context” (20). For Giles, an international scholar of America, part of resistance to
American imperialism comes from understanding the effect of American power in a more complex way than debates within America alone sometimes allow. This leaves Giles questioning his colleagues: “Merely proclaiming a resistance to empire, in other words, is not enough; imperial metaphors have saturated U.S. foreign policy and, more surreptitiously, the American studies movement to such an extent that any decentering of their assumptions will inevitably be a long, hard process” (23). For Giles, frames of reference and professional norms need to be decentered as much as definitions of America in order for the resistance to become more effective. Giles and American Studies are not alone in coming to this conclusion.

In the essay “Being There: Thoughts on Anarchism and Participatory Observation,” Luis A. Fernandez writes eloquently on how participation in globalization protests added depth and specificity to his knowledge of the issues he researched, describing the bloody dissidents at the WTO protest in Cancun in 2003 before noting,

> Prior to this, I had understood, in my head, the reality of human desperation resulting from globalization. I read the major theorists, the critiques of global capitalism, and understood the importance of direct action and autonomy. Yet, I understood these things as facts, as intellectual arguments, in the way that academics understand ideas much of the time. Now I was confronted with this reality face-to-face and it penetrated me in ways I had not expected. (94)

For Fernandez, the process of learning about police power and the policing of dissent is inherently linked to experiencing that policing alongside the protesters themselves, in order to understand the real-world consequences of the theoretical analyses first-hand. In the end, this leads him to arguing for *Verstehen*, “an approach to knowledge that calls for empathy, compassion, and understanding” and that “involves a deep commitment to and involvement with
those under study, as well as an attempt to connect with the intentions, passions, and lives of
those in the margins” (99). If such an argument for engaged commitment needs to be made in
the social sciences, it should come as no surprise that the form of scholarship Fernandez
advocates for is even rarer in the even more bookish realms of literary and theatric scholarship.¹
However, this study would not be the same without the endless conversations with refugees,
artists, activists, torture victims, and untold individuals struggling to survive political and
economic oppression across four continents. The arguments bend not only around the arcs of
dramatic narratives, but also the curves of lives encountered, and the broad circle of Midan
Tahrir in the center of Cairo. It is one thing, after all, to see the violent images of protesters
beaten. It is another to find them messaged to your office computer in Iraq by friends in Egypt,
and to think back to the nights during the bombing of Gaza when plain-clothed secret police
would roam the square and surrounding streets, looking for dissidents to beat and arrest. There is
a need for more scholarship that breathes the breath of these struggles, that overcomes the fear of
citationality and challenges the forms by which we create knowledge. Perhaps this is why
Darius Rejali begins his study Torture and Democracy with a telling quote from Machiavelli: “In
general, men judge more by sight than by touch. Everyone sees what is happening but not
everyone feels its consequences” (1).

Similarly, the late Dwight Conquergood, a performance scholar who knew something of
the spaces that most artists and academics don’t go—refugee camps, gang areas, federal
executions—came to the same conclusion on the need for a more dialogical form of performance
and scholarship:

¹ It was a common joke among the plethora of anthropologists that I knew in Cairo that they forgot I was not one of
their own, not just because I had read many of the same theorists, but also because, as one put it, “your people do not
do field research.” While this is not a de facto truth, it is not a particularly surprising conclusion from the viewpoint
of Middle Eastern streets.
One path to genuine understanding of others, and out of this moral morass and ethical minefield of performative plunder, superficial silliness, curiosity-seeking, and nihilism, is dialogical performance. This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. … There is always enough appreciation for difference so that the text can interrogate, rather than dissolve into, the performer. (Conquergood, “Performing” 9)

For years, the structure of these forms of dialogic performance was for individuals to go into the field and perform the stories they found there upon return, but there was always the question of how anyone encountering those stories would be able to find or analyze any level of validity within them. This was always the problem with Victor Turner’s formation of the pedagogical possibilities of ethnographic performance. On one hand, there is merit in the idea of how personal engagement with other cultures can instruct students, as when Turner writes,

There is nothing like acting the part of a member of another culture in a crisis situation characteristic of that culture to detect inauthenticity in the reporting usually made by Westerners and to raise problems undiscussed or unresolved in the ethnographic narrative. However, this very deficiency may have pedagogical merit insofar as it motivates the student/actor to read more widely in the literature on the culture. (98)

The problem arises in Turner’s formation that students actually understand cultural tropes better through adapted performance methods of using objects from one culture to perform rituals from another. For example, when Turner writes, “Surely, at so many removes, must not the whole performance have seemed highly artificial, inauthentic? Oddly enough, according to the
students, it did not,” the natural question, quite simply, is how the students would know (96). If, in fact, the students turned to reading about the culture after the performance, and not before, how would they know what an authentic performance looked or felt like? Likewise, shouldn’t the goal be to send the students to the culture, not to books about the culture alone?

Too often performance that even involves the transference of information between cultures similarly replicates the (neo)colonialist structures that need to be resisted in the first place. Turner’s example, like so many others, relies on either native informers or non-native interlopers—in the great colonial tradition—teaching the dominant, Western culture about strange, ethnic traditions. There is never a moment of mutual communication of cultures, nor of a steady dialogue between them. There is never a sense that the students, who might read more—a noble goal, no doubt—after the experience, might also travel to less studied spaces themselves, that they might attempt to acquire the information that would allow them to understand the performance experience in a more personal way, rather than through a perverse replication of museum practices. As Conquergood notes, “[Raymond] Williams critiqued scholars for limiting their sources to written materials; I agree with [Kenneth] Burke that scholarship is so skewed toward texts that even when researchers do attend to extralinguistic human action and embodied events they construe them as texts to be read” (Conquergood, “Performance” 147). Turner understood that text alone would not save anthropology, as it struggled through coming to terms with the discipline’s colonial roots. However, in attempting to use performance to move students toward text, he merely adapted the path to the problem, and did not remove the structure of the problem itself.

Too often, too many theater artists allow themselves to fall into the same trap, formulating works that critique symptoms of systems of structural oppression, rather than the
systems themselves, providing their audiences with deep levels of pity or humor, but no means by which to act against those structures. And too often theater critics, scholars, and audiences, in an equally symptomatic habit, label such works as political, rather than acknowledging how they reconstitute the systems they intend to critique. Returning to Conquergood provides an important reminder of this: “We can think of performance (1) as a work of imagination, as an object of study; (2) as a pragmatics of inquiry (both as model and method), as an optic and operator of research; (3) as a tactics of intervention, an alternative space of struggle” (Conquergood, “Performance” 152). The first of these formations seems axiomatic at this moment in history; however, the true meaning of the second and third modes still leave a lot to be desired. For performance to exist as a method of inquiry, it first must admit what it doesn’t know, in order to choose to seek answers, to explore the terrain less traversed and to search for answers to the questions less asked. Similarly, a more expansive map of people, of lives and stories worth telling, must also find their way to stage, so the questions asked will also change. And it is only through this dialectical process that performance can move to be being a tactic of intervention, “an alternative space of struggle.” In this way, the flesh that stops, the souls that pause, as Dolan writes, can pause in a more inclusive space, beside those whose flesh and souls are not typically contacted in the venues of performance, whose questions and possible answers are not typically constructed in the utopian narrative.

This, of course, is not easy. Aside from requiring a massive, broad-based admittance of a lack of knowledge and a need to explore, the ability to move is not equal. The challenge in cross-cultural dialectics is that the world, in fact, is not flat, that many of the spaces whose stories are least told have people who are not allowed to traverse their borders, whether for legal, political, or economic reasons. A simple conversation with a Palestinian in Jordan who has
never been able to travel the two hours to Jerusalem makes this clear. Or with an Egyptian in the subsidized housing on the edges of Cairo, struggling to learn English for a better job, but unable to afford—or receive—a visa to America. Or an Iraqi waiting for a visa to any country where a war is not waging and he or she can work or study. And yet these stories must be told. There is a responsibility given to those with the privilege to traverse space, whose voices are overly privileged in cultures of wealth and power, to walk beside of, rather than reach down to, the struggling of the world, to challenge the inherited borders, and to speak the unspoken stories, not in a colonial one-way street, but in a dialectic of constant returns, in a method that challenges the structures that limit who can travel and speak their own story, in a way that allows the traveled, and not just the visited, to be interrogated as well.

In fall of 2010, I stood on a Kurdish hillside with two of my students on either side of me, discussing regional politics, as our shadows stretched out over the area in which we had eaten lunch. The two were separated by about twenty years in age, but had bonded over having both lived as refugees in Sweden, a particular stroke of luck for the younger of the pair, who had lived his whole life prior to arriving to Erbil in Sweden and did not know any Kurdish. As the sun slowly drifted downward behind us, the older student told me about the route through the mountains to Iran—a common method of escape during the years of genocidal campaigns under Saddam Hussein, when villages were bulldozed and similar valleys set on fire, so the helicopters from Kirkuk could mow down the resistance—with a tone of distant and difficult memories. And then, in one of the few parts of the world to have benefited from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the younger student asked, “So why did the U.S. invade Iraq anyway?” I readjusted the bag on my shoulder, carrying, among other items, a copy of another student’s memoirs of having been
tortured by the Ba’athists at age fourteen because of poetry she had written, and swallowed deeply. I listed off a number of common explanations—oil, geopolitical strategy, removing Saddam, threatening Iran, protecting Israel, and a messianic belief in spreading “American values”—arguing that they all played a part, but, in the end, economics was the most important concern, and Saddam had stood outside the neoliberal order. I looked out over the valley again, then turned back to my student, “But here’s the thing: for those of us who aren’t generals or politicians or CEOs, we have to find a way to have more conversations like this, that cross the boundaries we’ve inherited, so we can try to avoid more of the wars those in power will want to force upon us.”

Perhaps this is impossible. However, in a near-impossible coincidence, I learned during my research process that Naomi Wallace, the writer that ends this study, that has traveled to all my sites of research, spent time in the same corners of the world, asking similar questions, is from Louisville, the same city I was born in. And on the subject of the impossible, she turns to another voice from Louisville, the now-deceased activist Anne Braden, and so I will end with one quoting the other to answer this concern: “I remember what veteran civil rights activist Anne Braden said to me recently: The impossible just takes a little longer” (Kushner and Wallace 38). But it will take a little less long if we stand together across our inherited boundaries, listen and work and study and create art side-by-side. And, as the recent revolutions in the Middle East have demonstrated, if we begin today.
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