



PALGRAVE GOTHIC

Gothic War on Terror

Killing, Haunting, and PTSD in American Film,
Fiction, Comics, and Video Games

Danel Olson

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Palgrave Gothic

Series Editor
Clive Bloom
Middlesex University
London, UK

Dating back to the eighteenth century, the term ‘gothic’ began as a designation for an artistic movement when British antiquarians became dissatisfied with the taste for all things Italianate. By the twentieth century, the Gothic was a worldwide phenomenon influencing global cinema and the emergent film industries of Japan and Korea. Gothic influences are evident throughout contemporary culture: in detective fiction, television programmes, Cosplay events, fashion catwalks, music styles, musical theatre, ghostly tourism and video games, as well as being constantly reinvented online. It is no longer an antiquarian pursuit but the longest lasting influence in popular culture, reworked and re-experienced by each new generation. This series offers readers the very best in new international research and scholarship on the historical development, cultural meaning and diversity of gothic culture. While covering Gothic origins dating back to the eighteenth century, the *Palgrave Gothic* series also drives exciting new discussions on dystopian, urban and Anthropocene gothic sensibilities emerging in the twenty-first century. The Gothic shows no sign of obsolescence.

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Dedicated to five most warmly admired:
my friend Joyce Carol Oates for wanting to tell more stories,
my favorite living artist Fernando Botero for his brave Abu Ghraib Series,
my most-watched director Francis Ford Coppola for Apocalypse Now,
my spiritual brother Jerad Walters (of Centipede Press) for valuing and
publishing my works,
and my mentor Professor Jonathan Hill of Oxford University and St. Olaf
College, who taught me how to ask richer questions, listen carefully, love
literature, and savor life itself.

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Thank you to America's greatest novelist in my heart and mind, Joyce Carol Oates, for many emails sharing ideas, encouragement, art, humor, and photographs, as well as a terrific interview.

A salute to Master Sergeant Philip A. Cowen, U.S. Army Intelligence, who I am proud of for not only for being a polyglot, anthropology scholar, traveler, family man, and soldier, but for being my nephew. Thank you for sharing insights (non-tradecraft and non-confidential) on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and beyond. I called it "just a few questions"; you called it "the art of debriefing." There's a fine memoir waiting inside of you!

Featured as the cover, thanks to the photography of U.S. Army Specialist Lester Colley, is the world's largest graveyard, Wadi-al-Salam (Valley of Peace) in Iraq, adjoining the shrine of Imam Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad. This holy cemetery of 1500 acres has been taking the dead for the last 1400 years and holds upward of 5 million internments according to UNESCO's gorgeous book, *Najaf: The Gate of Wisdom*. In August 2004, American troops in Iraq took fire from cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army from this vast cemetery and responded by returning strikes and prowling the cemetery in their armored vehicles, whereupon weapons caches were found along with bats flapping out of crumbling crypts. In 36 hours, 4 Marines would die and more than 300 enemy militiamen perish.

Well-deserved credit to my eloquent student U.S. Army Staff Sergeant and Combat Engineer Edgar Pruneda for his invaluable insights on combat in Afghanistan, M2A3 mini-tank driving, taking battle footage,

observations on tribal cultures encountered, and illuminations on how war-experiences follow veterans.

This book would not be possible without the true scholarship, time, patience, interest, and goodwill of Palgrave Macmillan Senior Editor, Allie Troyanos, who gives magical confidence to her writers. Thanks to Arun Prasath, Project Coordinator for Springer Nature, for the prompt and superb planning advice and to Project Manager Kiruba Counassegarane for guidance over so many details.

Applause to the generous-spirited Palgrave Gothic Series Director Clive Bloom, not only for his insight on my projects and golden encouragement for this one but for his many books on the Gothic that I have turned to since the 1990s.

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Abrazos for my Amiga Dr. Mari-Carmen Marín, gracias for your newest book of soulful and honest poems, *Swimming Not Drowning* (Legacy, 2021).

Thank you (谢谢) for the uplifting conversations, my supportive, inquisitive, and astute friend, Chen Chenxi (陈晨曦), who must be the top scholar of Nabokov's long-forbidden *Lolita* at Qufu Normal University in Rizhao, Province of Shandong—and perhaps the best from Beijing to Hong Kong.

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A batcave of thanks to Professor and Psychologist Travis Langley for responding to my questions on Batman’s mental health and time in therapy. Warm recognition to Warner Brothers Studio for letting me see close up Batman’s costumes, weapons, and vehicles.

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Gratitude to the LSCS Board of Trustees, the Lone Star College Writing Awards Committee, my incandescent Dean Dr. Marie Morrison, supportive VPI Dr. Michael Burns, inspiring President Dr. Archie Blanson, visionary Chancellor Dr. Steve Head, and to my stimulating LSCS colleagues. Cheers to my fine students present and past who become friends, including Dustin Bass, who went on to become a journalist and creative writer and *Sons of History* podcaster, running his own marketing company, BassTrapp Media. I want to see your novel on the stateside Korean War veteran who makes a positive difference in a neighbor kid’s life come to print! Some of the movies I analyze in this book I first saw with Dustin Bass, and my first conversations about them were with Dustin, who like a true journalist notices every detail and asks why they are there.

A bow to the generosity of University of Stirling’s Impact Scholarship and the Scottish Government’s Saltire Scholarship which assisted my research.

Indebtedness to Stirling scholars who kindly enriched draft versions of my PhD research on the Global War on Terror with thoughtful questions during its yearly review panels: second supervisor Dr. Adrian Hunter, Professor Kristie Blair, Professor Ann Davies, and Dr. Matthew Foley.

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Unbounded love for my family: my giving wife, Professor Catherine Olson; inspiring daughters Juliana Celeste and Emily Sophia, who bring me ideas, cookies, movies, controversial books, and make me smile.

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Praise for *Gothic War on Terror*

“Terrifically interesting with riveting material fastidiously assembled, this is so impressive—a major work. Even video games! Amazing ... brilliant all-encompassing. Should be required reading.”

—Joyce Carol Oates, *Prolific American author of novels, novellas, stories, poetry, essays, and children’s books*

“In this penetrating study, Danel Olson undertakes an exhilarating critical triangulation of trauma theory, Gothic Studies, and the global war on terror in post-9/11 American culture. Daring to lift the dark veil that shrouds the counterterrorism initiative, it brings to light the Gothic motifs that inhabit the gaps, the silences, and the elisions that have been wrought by internecine acts of violence. Through a series of illuminating close readings, the book foregrounds the extent to which much modern and contemporary American literature and media, from fiction and comics to film and video games, habitually turns to the Gothic when it attempts to articulate, figure, or otherwise express the ongoing effects of trauma, offering up, in the end, a poignant reflection on the profound losses and manifold aggressions that have come to affect us all. As much a contribution to the study of trauma as a timely intervention within the field of Gothic Studies, *Gothic War on Terror* will be crucial reading for scholars, students, practitioners, and general readers alike.”

—Dale Townshend, *Professor of Gothic Literature (Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies) and Co-Editor, The Cambridge History of the Gothic, Volumes I–III (2020–2021)*

“An important and timely study of the ways war, violence, and trauma saturate the cultural imaginary and find expression through Gothic narrative. Wide-ranging and admirably interdisciplinary, Olson’s study helps us understand why the Gothic mode is so pervasive in contemporary culture. Theoretically adept and very current, *Gothic War on Terror* accomplishes what the best analyses of cultural artifacts strive for: it helps us know ourselves better.”

—Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Professor of English, Central Michigan University, and Editor of The Monster Theory Reader (2020)*

“Olson’s book is a welcome contribution to the ongoing debate about the impact of America’s post-9/11 actions. The book provides both a passionate critique of American foreign policy and a detailed account of its effect on domestic culture. Olson’s argument is marked by erudition, clarity, and theoretical agility, across a

rich selection of contemporary cultural forms, including novels, comics, video games, and films.”

—Alan Gibbs, *Lecturer in American Literature, University College Cork-Ireland, and Author of Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014)

“Danel Olson has delivered a spectacular companion to his earlier study, *9/11 Gothic*. While that book employed Gothic and trauma theories to explore 9/11 from the perspective of New York City-based fiction, this present volume expands his focus to encompass comics, video games, and film (including a not-to-be-missed section on the *Batman* movies where the Joker forms an uncanny parallel with Osama bin Laden). Olson has emerged as America’s guru of post-9/11 inspired Gothic art and popular culture.”

—Tony Magistrale, *Professor of English, University of Vermont, and Co-Editor, Violence in the Films of Stephen King* (2021)

“Olson’s excellent study of how American Gothic culture narrates the trauma of 9/11 and the ongoing War on Terror is essential reading. Covering a captivating range of media, Olson convincingly demonstrates that American Gothic constitutes a unique and powerful voice capable of articulating an era of grief, guilt, and conflict, from the ruins of the Twin Towers to the atrocities of Abu Ghraib and beyond.”

—Johan Höglund, *Professor of English, Linnaeus University, and Co-Editor, Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene* (2022)

“Trauma and its aftermath, violence and the gothic: Danel Olson is uniquely qualified to splice these themes together. In the process, he has created a priceless contribution to the literature of invasions and insurgencies, to the study of slaying and its mental health consequences.”

—Patrick McGrath, *Author of Last Days in Cleaver Square* (2021)

“From the Dark Knight of Gotham to the darkest recesses of the soul, Olson’s authoritative study—ranging from video games and art to popular cinema—probes the postmillennial Gothic turn and traumatised present in the American cultural imagination. Compelling and necessary reading for students and scholars in contemporary Gothic Studies.”

—Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, *Senior Lecturer in Film Studies (Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies) and Co-Editor of Twentieth-Century Gothic* (2022)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danel Olson has taught in Palestine, Canada, China, and America on argument, literature, and film, earning his PhD (on terrorism) in 2017 from the University of Stirling, Scotland. Three-time finalist for the Bram Stoker Award, winner of a Shirley Jackson Award and two World Fantasy Awards, his published volumes on *The Exorcist*, *The Devil's Backbone*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and *The Shining* have been named “a major contribution to film history and scholarship” by *The Washington Post*.

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PART I

Introduction: The Sandstorm of War



CHAPTER 1

Interpreting Gothic Presence Inside the Global War on Terror's Novels, Comics, Movies, and Video Games Via Trauma Theory

This book is a journey remembering, reimagining, and contending with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) via storytelling media from 2002 to 2022. It is a study of how fighters against terrorism, as reflected in 20 years of American storytelling art, are shaped by their extreme experiences at the time of incident and haunted by strange forms later. These battlers of terrorism may be masked vigilantes, New York City Police, FBI, CIA, NCIS, NSA, U.S. military intelligence officers, U.S. army armored infantry and tank corps, U.S. Marines, and U.S. government contracted interrogators, prison administrators, in-country trainers of Afghan or Iraqi national police and security forces, and psychologists. The other criterion for this study is that somewhere the counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency protagonists face paranormal activities in the narratives, ones that engage Gothic art and literature's preoccupation with the uncanny, decay, disease, despair, death, and return of the repressed. The indisputable point is that something forever follows these protagonists either by what they had to do, or wish they had done, or what they saw and heard and felt. Their wartime behaviors, like their posttraumatic stress, persist and trail them into peacetime. Some are like living ghosts come back to haunt their homeland. Some find that they can only cease being haunted by dying themselves.

If we consider alcohol and opioid misuse rates, partner and child abuse statistics, homelessness, incarceration occurrences, and suicide numbers for the millions of veterans that returned from our wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan at the twenty-first century's dawn (Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs 2022), we can conclude that our mission to re-integrate warriors into American society has not succeeded. For other cultures, as the Bronze Star Iraqi war veteran tank crew member and novelist of *Spoils* (2017b) Brian Van Reet reminds us, "one common practice was to purify combatants after [a war], cleansing them of any evil spirits that might have trailed them home from battle.... A tribe would gather to hear a warrior recount his exploits, going into graphic detail, the bloodier the better" (Van Reet 2017a). But in other societies, "to tell war stories risked conjuring the dead and was considered dangerously taboo" (2017a). American culture, perhaps because it is so new or possibly because it is so varied, follows neither of those traditions strictly. One of the ways American creators conjure these wars after they are over is through the media forms I investigate here. Often 10 or 20 years after one of our many large-scale foreign conflicts, some of the richest cultural artifacts about the wars emerge, so this is a ripe time to be exploring GWOT narratives in all forms. As confirmation of this precedent, we might consider among those a blockbuster novel written 20 years after America's entrance World War II, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) or a shattering short story collection appearing 17 years after America signed the 1973 Paris Peace Accord with North Vietnam, Tim O' Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990).

Though some of the storytellers conjuring the GWOT I explore here were not born in the United States (for instance, filmmakers Christopher and Jonah Nolan are from England and video game maker and gaming theorist Gonzalo Frasca is from Uruguay), these storytellers were U.S. citizens or residents at the time of making the art I review and should be considered part of the stream of American culture and communication. My earlier PhD research was on the mass murder of 9/11, the missing bodies, and authors' perceptions of their ghosts from the World Trade Center. I wrote a volume on that Twin Towers phenomenon for Rowman & Littlefield (*9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City's Terrorism Novels*), before I started on this one for Palgrave Macmillan's Gothic series, and analyzed the force that these three elements have on survivors of Al Qaeda terrorism inside New York City's fiction (Olson 2021). But as the GWOT ended its official and surreal experience in Afghanistan with the American-Taliban peace accord and the last American and NATO troops departing in haste and confusion by the Taliban deadline of August 31, 2021 (leaving behind many of the hardworking and risk-taking Afghans who provided us support), I could see it was time for a new focus. I wondered what the GWOT works of imagination from two

wars on terror means to us now and why do they often have some Gothic impulses and forms within them? Some of the most contributive studies on the GWOT and the Weird so far have illuminated the way that American cinema, for example, was “able to uniquely reflect, interpret, and even influence the cultural discourse of the era” from 2001 to now (McSweeney 2014). Beyond noting how cinema can make, mirror, muddle, or mold our depictions of violence and monstrosity, as well as our views and acts against the Other, a number of influences on my study dramatize how Hollywood and the military–industrial–entertainment complex offers and negotiates “the desires and anxieties of the American Empire” as it went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq (Höglund 2014). However, no study I see as yet has probed why the GWOT popular media (including graphic novels, movies, video games, and textual novels that are otherwise realistic) invites the Gothic into its pages, digital film frames, or game coding.

To that end, this monograph investigates three facets of these GWOT works as yet underreported and barely analyzed. First, I establish there is a tendency in this despairing storytelling media to fixate on the ghostly, the doppelgängers, and other hauntingly Gothic forms, and I ask why. To systematically search for Gothic characters, imagery, and impulses in the GWOT transmedia is the quest. Second, using the scholarship of Gothic Studies and Trauma Theory, as well as psychoanalysis’s re-interpreters and re-assessors (including Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Dominick LaCapra, Ruth Leys, Robert Jay Lifton, Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, Richard J. McNally, David Punter, Roger Luckhurst, Alan Gibbs, Michelle Balaev now Satterlee, and many others), I wish to articulate what their pattern of recurring Gothic presence might indicate, spy upon, affirm, or rebel against. I perceive that Trauma Theory as it came to us in the 1990s is still an evolving understanding and that there is a danger in holding too prematurely or fixedly to one concept of trauma’s lingering effects and how they work. We should always be interrogating rather than too readily accepting of models of trauma. Therefore, I will take some ideas from a mix of theorists, sometimes scholars in sharp debate with each other, knowing that each theorist may have gaps and leaps in logic, conundrums, and aporias in their main lines (many apparent holes in Caruth’s work convincingly exposed by Gibbs 2014), sometimes extravagant statements, untested yet still often quoted ideas, and sweeping conclusions in their models. To rigidly apply the model of one theorist or trauma school risks pushing a reading of media past the point of reason. Humbly and cautiously put forward, with the admission that there is always a vast

amount more to learn on trauma that could upend tomorrow any interpretation made today, ever ready with a questioning stance and one open to variations and the newest discoveries on how trauma works, seems a more careful way to start the investigation.

By a Gothic presence encountered, I would mean the settings, ghosts and monsters, language, dire situations, moods, and impulses mixing the abject, corporality, contagion, decay, despair, abusive power, and illicit sex, as the Gothic manifested dramatically and shook maddeningly against Enlightenment literature from the eighteenth century that was more hopeful, tranquil, and possibly naïve about human nature and sickness. More specifically, what insights does this Gothic life-in-death existence that crept inside GWOT works reveal about the experience of post-terror trauma for characters? Do these Gothic presences, moods, allusions to or full-blown re-presentations of iconic characters (from Dr. Frankenstein and his Creature, to Dr. Marbuse, to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, to Poe's wakeful killer of the bedded blue-eyed one in "The Tell-Tale Heart," and other Gothic creations) have a catalytic role in these works, driving characters to reveal, to becoming conscious of what is often shadowing them, and abreact or release some of their emotions from the trauma? Third, I examine the potent nature within the marriage of trauma with the Gothic in these works, specializing on flashbacks in the storytelling (especially of gunfire or explosives, of rape and torture, of killing and cover-up, or desecration and hasty burial of supposed-enemy corpses). Such flashbacks may wear a monstrous or Gothic face not present in the actual traumatic incident, as what one real GWOT soldier calls the "six-foot-five 'destroyer' demon that manifests as a man with a buffalo head" (Van Reet 2017a) and which followed him back to America after the Iraqi war. Such trauma is an animating agent, a darkly artistic and ever damaging force in the fiction. And these flashbacks, developed as the story goes on to longer durations, keep people fighting the same battles over and over, revealing what both perpetrators and victims feel ashamed to tell anyone else but us. A bridging question to answer in this book is how these flashbacks form strands of connection from one creative work in one genre to another.

These GWOT imaginative works feature the instruments that would try to carry out what some call President Bush's "utopian fantasy" or his fervent declarations made in 2001 and again in 2003 to bring democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq along with nation-building, removing of terrorists and dictators, finding of supposed weapons of mass destruction (in Iraq), and an evidenced military warning to other adversaries (from Iran to

North Korea, Russia, and China) that the United States was now a preemptively attacking Super Power. Though the invasions were phrased often by national politicians as an American sacrifice to keep the world safe, the wars had the scent of redemption through violence, a bloody theme that has marched through America's history from its earliest days (especially its practiced belief in Manifest Destiny) as well as its sermons and political oratory then, and its literature and cinema now. Two invasions and occupations later, it is hard to reconcile how these were presented by the White House as a liberating gift of democracy, literacy, increased parliamentary representation for minority tribes and majority religious sect, and an uplifting of women's rights for the people living in unstable countries. Many of these goals are noticeably absent in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In sectarian-violence stricken Iraq, there is even a nostalgia for the more orderly period of Saddam Hussein from 2003 and before (the one before 40 sects would join an insurgency killing thousands, political chaos would descend from divided and self-interested small politicians and warlords, coalition-government formation would prove vexing or impossible, and basic services like the electrical grid became dysfunctional). And that longing is even now by some of the ruthless dictator Hussain's leading critics from back in 2003, like the Iraqi world-class wrestler Qatham Sherif al-Jabouri, who was held 11 years in prison by Hussain's forces for his beliefs. In 2003, al-Jobouri took a sledgehammer and smashed at a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad as seen in the iconic photo by Robert Nickelsberg. But "now I really regret hitting the statue," muses Sherif al-Jabouri (qtd. in Arraf 2018). In Afghanistan meanwhile, it is different and possibly even more fatalistic, all like a grim *deja vu*. Despite all the thousands of lives lost during Operation Enduring Freedom, after this intervention it is actually some of the same dreaded Taliban leaders who headed back to their same posts (or even promotions) 20 years later in 2021, despite the United States spending "nearly \$90 billion in security sector assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces" over 20 years (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2022). People in both countries' cities and villages, as it is painfully obvious now, had little choice in the manner of invasion and occupation.

Americans who carried out the intelligence, reconnaissance, anti-terror, and military work to these countries and in America itself are those that I will address. All of them activated after September 11, 2001. These characters in the media of imagination are all trained to track and rescue, to

hunt and capture, to identify and to kill, to clear a neighborhood and to hold it, unlike the civilians studied in my previous work that has a family relationship to this one, *9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City's Terrorism Fiction*. President Bush's pre-emptive military campaign beginning promptly after 9/11 is the one to which he invested his political capital. In hindsight, it appears as an expensive political illusion, a military-led fairy tale and bloody boondoggle akin in its brashness to the Days of Empire a century and more ago when a European army and navy would battle so long that the original mission was nearly forgotten. President George W. Bush's dark investment was an ironic one, too, often making legions of future terrorists when Iraqi or Afghan civilians were by accident or design either tortured or killed by our forces. Compounding these horrors were specific incidents that stayed in headlines and online for a long time.

In Shinwar, Afghanistan, on March 4, 2007, *The New York Times* reports that U.S. Marines sprayed gunfire and killed up to 50 innocent people fleeing the scene of automobile explosion, which the Pentagon via Army Colonel John Nicholson called "a terrible, terrible mistake." His Pentagon address drew indignation from some American citizens and politicians who wished the U.S. to admit no errors. Then Nicholson said to the people of Shinwar that he and the U.S. armed forces were "respectfully ask[ing] for your forgiveness" (Nicholson 2007). In another occupied country, on November 19, 2005, a squad of U.S. Marines patrolling in Haditha, Iraq, shot dead (at close range) 24 unarmed civilians, actually entering three homes to kill residents who had not fired upon them and dragging 5 civilians out of a taxi who were also shot. Among the dead, as *The Washington Post* reported, were a 76-year-old grandfather (Abdul Hamid Hassan Ali) and his wife a 66-year-old grandmother (Khamisa Tuma Ali). The youngsters killed included an 8-year-old (Muhammad Younis Salim), a 5-year-old (Zinab Younis Salim), a 4-year-old (Abdullah Walid), a 3-year-old (Aisha Younis Salim), and an unidentified 1-year-old child (Knickmeyer 2006). They appear, at first sight, to have been shot as if they were targets in a video game by the soldiers stationed to protect them. A two-month old named Asia Ali managed to survive the massacre by some miracle (Knickmeyer 2006). A month later (according to *The Denver Post* and National Public Radio), authorized by battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Chessani in December 2005, the U.S. Marines "paid at least \$38,000 to the families of Iraqi civilians killed" (Bowman 2006). That comes to \$1583 for a victim's life.

Led by Staff Sergeant Frank Wuterich in the killing at Haditha, none of the American soldiers would serve prison time following their trials. Squad leader Staff Sergeant Wuterich, who *Time* magazine placed in two of the houses where civilians were killed, would receive a single count of negligent dereliction of duty, receiving a reduction in his rank to private and cut in his pay, which outraged Iraqis and people around the world, and prompted cries for an independent war-crimes trial held outside of American purview. Few of these mistakes by troops or their leaders were learned from, apparently, and the bad news grew when four U.S. Marine scout snipers (in the countryside of Helmand Province, Afghanistan around July 27, 2011) lingeringly urinated on Taliban fighters that they had shot dead. The following year, a user identified as “semperfiLone-Voice” uploaded video of the 42nd golden shower of disgrace onto YouTube. Post the U.S. military’s identification of one of the soldiers, his court martial, a demotion, and a \$500 fine for relieving himself upon dead enemies, the found-guilty sniper Sergeant Joseph Chamblin told his local TV station in Charlotte, NC, “he’d do it again”: “Do I regret doing it? Hell no. Do you want the Marine Corps to be a group of Boy Scout pretty boys?” (Wong 2013). Fallout came soon after the video was posted. In February 2012, four other Western soldiers fighting in Operation Enduring Freedom in eastern Afghanistan (all French) were shot dead (and eight more of their French comrades were injured) by an Afghan soldier who suddenly turned on them. The once-allied shooter said he “did it because of the video in which American soldiers were urinating on bodies” (Staff 2012). Within days, French President Sarkozy threatened to pull out French soldiers from the Afghanistan operation, and by November 2012 (under President Hollande), France’s combat troops were withdrawn. But more public relations disasters had happened before the French left: in 2011, six U.S. Army troopers in the Parwan Detention Center of Afghanistan burned three hundred Holy Qurans belonging to detainees. Even in the wild case of these Qurans containing secret messages scribbled inside them from one inmate to another, these holy books could have been confiscated by the American soldiers and still honorably stored. There was no cause to burn them, demeaning and enraging millions of Muslims around the world. Once publicized, these violent and insulting acts would cause riots (after the Quran burning, for example, 30 people including U.S. soldiers would die in riots from a single night in the Afghanistan countryside, and eventually end in frustrated and humiliated American withdrawals from centers that they had risked their lives to

clear). The witnessing of frequent failures or even surrenders in American-trained Afghan and Iraqi forces would weaken the American Empire financially, politically, and militarily. American and Coalition and NATO forces left millions of pieces of advanced equipment on the ground for either the ISIS and Al Qaeda enemy (in Iraq) or for the Taliban enemy (in Afghanistan), which would become useful to terrorists worldwide and hard cash for weapons smugglers (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2022). However, in the GWOT works of imagination, the full story of regretful military misadventures and perpetrator trauma has yet to be fully told. There is a growing sense of unease in these artifacts, but not the complete picture of how grimly and hopelessly all would end, despite the fortunes spent, endless hours of work, mental and physical health damaged, hundreds of millions of Iraqis and Afghans displaced or dead, many NATO and Coalition partners hurt or killed, and over seven thousand American lives lost, as the VAU Fallen Heroes monument attested on its reveal in 2018. This monument is a disturbingly beautiful, bright, and shining 28-foot-long Global War on Terror Memorial Flag composed of red, silver, and blue dog tags. Stamped into the dog tags are the names, rank, and day of fatal trauma for the fallen American troops.

As potent as the memorials are, something unintended, uninvited, and uncanny surrounds them and their sense of loss, mortality, and defeat. Furthermore, some Gothic spirits hover, weave, and shadow along the GWOT cultural products. This includes figures from earlier wars, even the Confederate shade of General J. E. B. Stuart drifts along with an MIA Abrams U.S. Marines tank crew as it loses itself in the Iraqi desert in *Haunted Tank* which we will cover. The ghosts of interrogation victims who were not particularly culpable, but were killed anyhow by an American counter-terrorist interrogator in *The Zero* just off the shores of New York City, follow that novel's protagonist, as well. These phantoms of the GWOT dead speak to us in the creative works, helping shape the narratives, their representations of strange realities, and their characters. But what exactly are the unexamined spectres saying or signifying in the American storytelling media from the War in Afghanistan (what the Pentagon called "Operation Enduring Freedom," starting on October 7, 2001, and including American and select NATO forces)? What are the phantasms that drift beside the living saying or indicating in the Iraq War ("Operation Iraqi Freedom" with American, Australian, Canadian, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Pakistani, New Zealand, and British forces, beginning March 20, 2003, and finally resulting in the Iraqi

parliament voting for all foreign troops to depart on January 2020)? How can we enlarge our view of the GWOT's apparitions and other paranormal entities in our memory and fiction, state-sponsored terrorism and non-state terror attacks outside of New York City? That is what this book traces: to watch the effects from the GWOT on survivors through the way they see ghosts and other paranormal creatures. To track ghosts is to watch William Faulkner's great truth: how the past never lets us go and to see how eventually every war story becomes a ghost story. This GWOT study will concentrate on three locales: American soil, Afghan and Iraqi sites, and Black Out sites (for the CIA and other intelligence agencies) around the world. To have some parameters so the discussion does not become limitless, I exclude the locales of contemporaneous American military support or direct involvement in other U.S.-designated Wars on Terror. Those off-limits reaches for this study would be in Cabo Delgado, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, the Philippines, the Trans Sahara, the Caribbean, and Central America. They all have ghosts of their own, and they wait for another book.

This study of creative media is also a travelog. Following the table of contents, we will begin the journey in New York City with forays into international waters outside its harbor for conducting torture interrogation in Jess Walter's *The Zero*, then we wander the forests and villages of upstate New York with Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* and J. Robert Lennon's *Castle* (accompanied by flashbacks to Iraq). Throughout their prose, we fly abroad to invasions, occupations, and anti-terror campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and (with visits to occasional Black Out sites for enhanced interrogation) in the graphic novels *Special Forces*, *Haunted Tank*, *Army@LOVE*, and *The Sheriff of Babylon*. Then we fly back to the version of New York City that is Gotham, dropping from Gothic spires with Batman in Directors Christopher Nolan's and Matt Reeve's Caped Crusader movies (with occasional trips to Europe, Asia, and Africa in those films). Last we wander once more to Afghanistan and Iraq (and to a decimated Dubai) in the video games *Kabul Kaboom!*, *September 12: A Toy World*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, and in the hyper-realistic game that is also a city-clearing, *Six Days in Fallujah*.

This book recurrently explores the gloomiest corners in the GWOT from American imaginative media to make its claims about how the Gothic (a) interrogates cultural history, (b) operates and tempts us like unmanned border-crossings do, inviting us to come outside them and to succumb to whatever is out there until as Johan Höglund puts it "the invader becomes

the invaded” (2014), and (c) forms a mode of remembering of historical abuses. We follow the powerful or feared characters’ actions, those of the perpetrators, and how their own traumas make them deny or repress the sadistic interrogations and killings they do. We will look at the weird and blind and strangely dream-filtered ways that torturers look back at the traumatic sufferings of the victims and how they push away their own suffering, just as we may sometimes discover that victims of sexual abuse seemingly forget that they were abused, and are taken aback by diaries’ entries they wrote years before about the transgressions or are shocked to read their therapist’s journal notes on their extreme sexual trauma of their case. Trauma, sadly, is like a toxic resource we can never run out of—it is flowing everywhere, especially in times of war. Trauma and its flashbacks, as Bessel van der Kolk notes in his breakthrough bestselling study *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* turns us towards the most “violent, bizarre, and self-destructive behaviors” (2014). We will ask in this book how such ghosts/traumatic clues/slips of speech/impulsive or compulsive acts may help us piece together a seemingly disjointed plot or explain a protagonist’s evasions with us. Such skittishness and rushed desire to move to the next topic or act or speech, a plot’s suspicious jump-cuts, or the invisible material between the panes (in comics) that is missing and that our inner eye has to supply page after page are key to our investigation. We will look at where the uncanny rises in the works and what its strange familiarity means. We will watch when the ghosts or other paranormal presences first rise and where they go. Beyond tracking them, we want to watch where there are flashbacks in all the works—is there a commonality between them in all the creative artifacts here? Also, what is encoded in these flashbacks, and how are they often featured in a Gothic language? What is warping a terror survivor’s morality and ethics (this protagonist of the American novel, movie, game, or comic), pushing them to abuse, torture, and murder again? How does the missing victim come back to its killer like a mutated virus come back to a population who thought they were inoculated? In this study of many unwelcomed and violent returns, it is central to ask how memory represses and encrypts what was abused and killed. Why, for example, do many of these characters who seemed to have some moral compass before the terrorism begins lose their memory and mental equilibrium soon after, turning to torture and murder, even dismembering and preserving body parts of an interrogated suspect, carrying the talismanic and fetishized pieces of another’s body upon their person? How and why do some protagonists (even if they will

not fully participate in it themselves) refuse to stop rape and killing right before their eyes by U.S. intelligence officers, detention staff, or combat soldiers? Why do some protagonists cover up others' horrible abuses or violence against children—those children fully innocent yet wrongly detained? And how does a protagonist discover that other source of pain that is not any of the above—that taste of death that is the lie which one's memory tells one's heart? Johan Höglund perceptively calls the American military solution to terrorism, as employed from the State Department, the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, the NCIS, the Pentagon, and the White House as an “exorcism” of the “Other through extensive violence—as regenerative, practical, clinical, and successful” (2014, 168). I would agree. The Gothic-imbued war horror within the creative media we are about to explore unveils the falseness behind the American government's claim that the invasions and occupations are principally a noble attempt to bring peace and rights, democracy and prosperity, removing terror and tyranny from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Within the GWOT, there are a thousand questions feeding American storytelling content. Why do some of the traumatized (especially soldiers) go back for more trauma, hooked on this dark stimuli like recreational drugs, finding this “discomfort and even terror, can ultimately become very enjoyable,” finding that fear and aversion has made a “gradual adjustment [in themselves, and] signals that a new chemical balance has been established within the body” (van der Kolk 2014). How haunted and wounded they are from the war, yet they sometimes want to return to it. In a talk at Provincetown, MA, I attended, by war photojournalist and renowned war essayist Sebastian Junger in 2018, as well from reading Chris Hedges' report in *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002), the same strange phenomena is remembered: traumatized soldiers and intelligence officers “seek out experiences that would repel most of us, and ... often complain about a vague sense of emptiness and boredom when they are not angry, under duress, or involved in some dangerous activity” (van der Kolk 1989). We have to ask of them: Why rush to what waits out there to abduct, shoot, starve, torment, or behead you? Our American novels, comics, films, and video games from 2002 to 2022 can offer some intriguing ideas.

There seem to be at least four patterns protagonists take amid the Gothic terrors and unholy scares within these creative artifacts: some figures (like the protagonist in Jess Walter's *The Zero*) inflict pain on terror cell suspects and forget doing it and are willing to do it again. Second,

others (like protagonist in J. Robert Lennon's *Castle*) remember inflicting pain on suspects and want to do it again; third, some (like Kincaid in Oates' *Carthage*) have splintered memories of watching other people inflict pain on someone and want to be punished for it. Last, other cast members (including Batman—though it changes upon which age and stage he is in and in which movie) have a mild to niggling sensation of the collateral damage they have inflicted upon the innocent in pursuing criminals (including rather frequently running over cop cars with his Tumbler or pushing semi-trucks off the road to explode) and know they should not do it, unless forced to, but they probably will again. The thrill of the chase down corrupt Gotham City's mean and rainy streets is too addictive.

In Director Christopher Nolan's final Batman movie, *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne allows Gotham to survive atomic attack by hauling the decaying neutron bomb to sea. Thought to be blown apart, Batman may still live: butler Alfred Pennyworth later spies him chatting and smiling with girlfriend Catwoman far from the dark skies of Gotham. In warm Italy, he enjoys a Florentine dessert and drink with Selina Kyle, as his stolid manservant either actually sees or actively imagines, though all the world mourns that "The Bat is Dead." Perhaps it is all merely only another ghost-sighting borne by trauma? Whichever it is, the difference is that these GWOT creative works will not dwell typically on atomic bombs or nuclear reactor chambers. They often concentrate on another sublime weapon in warfare. In these works, everyone lives in The Drone Age. From their heights, these insidious weapons suddenly swoop and shock and awe, manned by experts, perhaps one-thousand miles away. They strike at night and by day. American drones killed neutralized terrorists in reality and in the GWOT imaginative works, yet they also blew apart many civilians (as Iraqi and Afghan political leaders clamored after every disastrous mistake): everyday people struck dead in parking lots, at funerals, at weddings, and at family picnics in the sunny countryside.

The scale of the GWOT, which will be reflected in these artistic works, is sublime. Since 2011, Brown University's Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs "Cost of War Project" has been tracking the human, economic, political, and social damage wreaked by the GWOT, and the numbers are numbing. As of 2022, "thirty-eight million people have been displaced ... As a result of the wars the U.S. military has fought since 2001" (Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs 2022). The same Brown University Institute records the cost of the GWOT to be between 897,000 and 929,000 lives lost. When we figure in the whole

money invested—“direct Congressional war appropriations; war-related increases to the Pentagon base budget; veterans care and disability; increases in the Homeland Security budget; interest payments on direct war borrowing; foreign assistance spending; and estimated future obligations for veterans’ care”—we find the United States has spent \$8 trillion (Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs 2022). This cost ascends to one more awesome figure: “Interest payments [on the money borrowed for the GWOT] could total over \$6.5 trillion by the 2050s” (Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs 2022). Historians have rightly exclaimed that America’s future is not Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush (and other remote places in Iraq, as well), but that is where the American war machine spent unfathomable sums. Historians who are also American military officers and self-described as “anti-dumb war,” including Lieutenant Colonel William J. Astore who taught at the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Naval Postgraduate School, have decried these invasions in a Gothic metaphor: that we cut our stomachs open and drained our blood and life on to desert sands. The wars were the folly of “spilling blood and treasure with such reckless abandon” (Astore and Sjursen 2020). The level of American self-sabotage mirrored with self-deception has not been seen since the Vietnam War (Lifton 2009). *The Washington Post* reports that over one million American soldiers served in Iraq between 2003 and 2020 (Berger 2020) along with thousands of Coalition soldiers. Likewise, 800,000 American soldiers along with thousands of NATO soldiers served in Iraq between 2003 and 2021 (Suliman 2021). *Statista* reports that 7054 U.S. soldiers died there along with thousands of NATO and Coalition troops (Duffin 2022). Besides enriching some of the Fortune 500 companies and Department of Defense contractors (including Halliburton, which Dick Cheney chaired before becoming the U.S. Vice President), as well as some political and military leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan siphoning off funds to bank accounts offshore, and alleviating an American urge for revenge, it is hard to tell now how the politically unconnected people on the ground there ever benefited long-term from these occupations.

In Afghanistan, the United States and its allies invaded a country and under President Donald Trump decided not to include the civilian Afghan government in the Doha Peace Treaty with the Taliban in Qatar two decades later, effectively turning Afghanistan over to the exact regime that had tortured and ruthlessly controlled its people before and now continues to subjugate women to a lack of education, expression, and equal job

opportunities. In Iraq, another disaster unfolded with new fundamentalist power bases and networks emerging with contacts with American adversaries like Iran. The Americans have watched their military prowess and civilian reconstruction efforts mocked by enemies and allies alike, as well as having allies question involvement of ever coming to the aid of America once more. The entrance of NATO troops into Afghanistan was the first time its united umbrella protection plan had come to the aid of any member which was attacked, and some NATO members registered shock and complaint when the United States executed its evacuation of Afghanistan under President Joe Biden without a lengthy and deliberate consultation with the rest of NATO. Would NATO allies ever come again unhesitatingly to defend a member from another threat?

The question that lingers about the GWOT is what short or long term benefits were received for all the money and lives spent on it? As this question went largely unanswered in Washington D.C., China's President for Life Xi Jinping expanded the PRC's Belt and Road initiative in South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa having it built largely by Chinese labor and paid for by secured Chinese bank loans from the countries in which the projects are made (149 countries signing on by 2022). The days of American influence and empire (as Johan Höglund argues in his perceptive *The American Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence* (2014)) are threatened by its own ill-advised invasions, abysmal occupations, human rights violations, and anti-Islamic acts. In at least a dozen speeches, Osama bin Laden claimed America's role worldwide must be minimized; it must be seen as an evil-natured beast instead of protector of the free world; and it must leave the Arab world. The first two goals seem accomplished, at least by wide and objective journalistic sources covering the wars from the outside. This retreat is one of the uncovered reasons that the GWOT is so vital to study. The failures of the GWOT marred and weakened American presence and standing in the world, and the United States is in retreat from even promoting the idea of global democracies (however failed they may be and however slanted American may have made them for its own interests). This unfortunately happens simultaneous to the advance of strongmen leaders around the world who ban free press and kill reporters and their own unarmed critics and protesters, seen from Venezuela to Nicaragua, from Belarus to Russia, threatening and sometimes invading its smaller neighbors. Their plea is made, and their blood is being shed today, and what are we doing about it? This is an

academic work of investigation, but overarching it is a story of how the strong try to destroy the weak, but how the weak will still cry to be heard.

What darkens my research further is all that is missing. From all CIA, FBI, NCIS, NSA documents I read that have been heavily redacted, from all the videos of enhanced interrogation that were shredded, from all the photographs of physical and sexual abuse in detention centers taken by sadistic and bored staff thought too horrible to be published later, and from all the obfuscation and lies and justifications by U.S. political, intelligence, and military officials, the GWOT is a thing of massive horror. It is often draped by a veil, but what screen is large enough to cover its hideousness?

This study will suggest that GWOT storytelling successfully showcases the cruelties and horrors committed in the name of only making people “free.” Though hundreds of thousands of American, NATO, and Coalition soldiers served with highest honor imaginable and over 7000 Americans gave their life to an ideal in far off lands. But it cannot be denied that some of the well-armed liberators of Afghanistan and Iraq from across the sea became its tormentors. In real life in 2006, a peaceful Iraqi villager family’s modest door was kicked in, and a terrified girl was grabbed, raped, defaced, and slaughtered, while her old parents were shot along with any siblings that could be found. These four deaths happened in Mahmudiyah, Iraq, three years after Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced. These atrocities were covered-up and blamed on terrorists by the American soldiers stationed nearby (just as U.S. Marines in 2005 originally falsely blamed an IED explosion for the lives they actually slew by their own firearms in Haditha). Another three years later, in 2009, the truth was revealed in both American civilian courts and U.S. Army martial courts: five U.S. Army soldiers of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, of the 101st Airborne Division, who were stationed just two-hundred feet from the girl’s home, would admit their guilt to the rape and killings. As one example of many that this book will treat, these real tragedies are mediated through brilliant storytelling (in this case, through the unforgettable novel of Joyce Carol Oates, *Carthage*) giving us an intense emotional access that the official trial and attendant journalism cannot. A newspaper can show you the victim’s body; a novel makes you bury her. It is one more piece of evidence that if there is an American novelist who should have won a Nobel Prize for Literature at least a decade ago for fiction, it is Joyce Carol Oates, to join her fellow American Gothicists who deservedly won in 1949 (William Faulkner), 1978 (Isaac Bashevis Singer), and 1993 (Toni Morrison).

These creative forms on the GWOT help us feel more, as there is an immensity, infinity, and sublimity to wars of invasion and occupation. The aforementioned statistics, no matter how telling and accurate, are overwhelming and numbing. We need to take it down to the lives of one man one woman or one child, and that is what this creative media I investigate does. We need to suffer with them. Every character we dwell on in this study is deeply traumatized, whether perpetrator or the victim. Some other recurring elements there are that may puzzle readers and await our analysis—these strange and jarring intrusions in the GWOT media are the following:

- Use of force and torture will often be favored over time-tested ways of interrogation as it is instinctive and expedient, largely because the soldiers interrogating are poorly trained and in a vengeful state of mind. An insider military intelligence source I interviewed, from ten separate operations for the GWOT over 20 years in both Afghanistan and Iraq, noted that what consistently worked with gathering some useful reports from suspects or cooperation from potential human assets (who were working against the American effort, or at least not prone to help the Americans yet). Swaying the interrogatee came from the establishment of rapport, the concentration on how the subject's current anti-democratic activities were not getting them as far as they hoped, and the evidence for how working with the Americans could better their families and their income (whether they were farmers, trades people, currently unemployed except as information gatherers for the insurgency, or high-level communications experts).
- Despite this being war storytelling, the trauma surprisingly enough takes place in a setting long linked to the Gothic: in our study, trauma occurs in a castle in the woods (cf. *Castle*), a cave (cf. *Army@LOVE*), a decaying mansion (cf. *Sheriff of Babylon*), and a prison with dungeons for torture (cf. *Castle*, *Sheriff of Babylon*, and *Army@LOVE*).
- Characters are often not fully aware of what their trauma consists of, except that it keeps signaling itself to them via intrusive thoughts, panic attacks, dreams, and debilitating flashbacks.
- Intense feelings “of danger, aggression, sexual arousal, and terror” often accompany the flashbacks of victimization and violence (van der Kolk 2014).
- Monsters or ghosts often accompany the flashbacks, hallucinations, or visions.

Loss in the GWOT varied works addressed here often wears a Gothic face, the precise contours of which I shall outline. A sudden vanishing forever of her husband once made a depressed Christina Stead, who wrote the novel *The Man Who Loved Children*, write in a letter to a friend that “Every love story is a ghost story” (qtd. in Max 2012). I would adopt that haunting truism to the exploration here and claim that “Every terrorist story (and anti-terrorist tale) is also a ghost story.” Personages within the works, within the midst of their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, become convinced that they have communed with phantoms, and as a result, their survivor identities reconfigure. Very few current interpreters on the fiction of capturing, interrogating, or killing terror suspects have considered the extent to which its writers continuously turn to Gothic imaginings to register what characters saw or felt over its fearsome ambiguities. Even fewer critics address the extent to which writers of GWOT art employ these components and themes from over 250 years of Gothic works. All of the characters here will do terrible acts (from premeditated torture and killing and mutilation of corpses at the worst end, to bystanding during rape, to unintended manslaughter, or simply letting people die when they could have saved them). As this book will argue, GWOT imaginative media reaches for and successfully uses Gothic conventions and motifs much more than is recognized. Ghosts, monsters, doppelgängers, and other paranormal players materialize. Frantic thoughts and the speech of distress and disassociation arises. There is mystery over murders and its accompanying menacing, mad characters. The anti-heroes are haunted, turned, and corrupted by initially sympathetic figures, who turn out to be villains of notable deceptions. The moral disease and physical malaise are reflected in overarching metaphors of decay in families, societies, and empires. Nightmares, visions, omens, and searing revelation cast their shadows over characters. Evil is attractive, even alluring to them here. The Gothic feeds unstoppable passions and dreads amid a sublime setting, and horrible violations and disproportionate punishments result. Perhaps these fictional renderings of war and communal traumas (national or international) ally themselves with the Gothic best (more so than other movements and impulses in literature), because this Gothic mode or complex tells the lies that can share shattering emotional truths.

The monster in the twenty-first-century terrorism can take many shapes. It could be the Al Qaeda trained fighter, the Allied soldier gone insane, the eager torturer from the Coalition of the Willing, the ISIS zealots of religious and civil wars who brandish decapitating blades, a

president or prime minister launching invasions costly in blood and treasure, a legislator for whom bodies are just statistics to fire rhetoric and further election, the Taliban victors who abduct, rape, then murder a woman travelling unchaperoned, a visitant in the shape of a blown-apart body, or a ghost voice that will not be hushed.

The portrayals of instant ruin in the novels we witness herein exploit all aspects that journalism and historical accounts officially eschew: subjectivity, affect, passion, irrationality, and the supernatural. Each of these GWOT works has an identifiably, if half-buried by sand, Gothic foundation. Perhaps excavating these various layers, showing the Gothic features and personalities and outcomes of the works will show why present authors reached for this mode from 250 years ago. If these works of terror-tragedy do employ motifs derived from the Gothic sphere, it may well attest to the fact that the Gothic is not always merely titillation of the darkest kind, nor always mindless horror shows or thoughtless diversions or circulating library hackwork no better than, as Coleridge unforgettably snubbed the Gothic in *Biographia Literaria*, “gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking” (Coleridge 1817). More than a kind of literary frippery, then, the Gothic forms part of a vigorous study of time, place, injury, memory, the secret, the strange within the familiar, and futile attempts at healing. The Gothic novel invokes all those concerns articulated in contemporary trauma theory of the last 30 years, a system of ideas that, along with cultural criticism on terrorism, will draw us towards a three-part conversation they are having with each other.

If, as Angela Carter postulated in 1974, “We live in Gothic times” (Carter 1987, 132), then the Gothic might lend itself now as the most useful and appropriate mode for representing terror post-9/11. The conceptual framework I extrapolate from are threefold: (1) Often the dead from terror wars possess the living witnesses, largely in behavior, obsessions, and even new careers, and physical relocations, as first discussed in the landmark medical reports on victims from psychiatrists Lindemann and Adler after Boston’s devastating 1942 Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire (Lindemann 1944). I explore in these terrorism works how characters are often losing their identity, often one of horror and Gothic writing’s chief dreads and pathological processes. The dead function as co-witnesses with the living as these characters face new traumas. (2) The line often vanishes altogether between victim and victimhood in the same individual during and after the GWOT incident, and the idea of autoimmunity in the state

moves us beyond stable, fixed notions of national victimhood, as established forcefully in Jacques Derrida's philosophy on terror (Derrida 2003). Much mirroring exists between cultural/religious adversaries (as developed by Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, David Punter, and others). (3) Dreams and visions and gaps in memory, along with radical uncertainty, reveal our fears, sadness, lies, longings, and testing of limits (as explained from Freud and his re-interpreters). Thus derives my sense that characters "phantomize" their trauma to utter it, putting it into the form of a paranormal figure. Cathy Caruth's "inexpressible trauma" actually finds its voice all along in the creative works through Gothic phenomena and transformation (when a trauma story turns into a quasi-Gothic novel)—with disguised beings, references to Gothic scenes unbearable and perverse, and to encrypted language inviting decoding. Just as psychiatrists Lindemann and Adler studying the real-life fire survivors of 1942 Boston noticed that these traumatized people would eerily wear the old clothes of their dead friends, style themselves like the dead ones, try to speak like them, and even embrace their professional interests and hobbies, our GWOT survivors suffer a personality change. After the terrorist attack, the dead inhabit the living fictional characters, and they speak through the living. They are not supernatural wisps to be vented like smoke; rather, they are the very shades of terrorism's lasting fires. And just as the novels of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison held up dark mirrors to the metaphoric ghosts of miscegenation and the subjugation of African-Americans in *Light in August* (1932) and *Beloved* (1987), respectively, so the GWOT artifacts here can presently hold that frightening mirror up to citizens who live in a transitional time when privacy and freedoms are curtailed in order to expand government power and when motives of blind revenge and voter-currying among governmental leaders fuel the military decisions that lead to cycles of invasion, death, more terrorism, and more fear.

We head now to the places where the obsessions and concepts within trauma theory (and trauma novels) and Gothic studies (and Gothic novels) converge to see what that overlap reveals. In this journey, we recall Jerrold E. Hogle's insight that "Gothic fiction has always begun with trauma—usually multiple kinds of trauma at the outset and in retrospect" (Hogle 2014, 72). What keeps a terrorist novel or a Gothic novel from becoming just another predictable product of the culture industry is terrorism and the Gothic merging together, as these novels repeatedly do. Before addressing the conventions of the War on Terror work, it is important to foreground the particular conceptualization of trauma that founds

and underpins this book. Despite their being set in one of the most known cities of the Western world, and the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers that they either depict or at least reference being the most-watched catastrophe ever experienced in real-time before as Jennifer Wallace estimates that approximately 2 billion viewers around the world watched live as the Twin Towers fell (2020, 26), these fictions are still enigmatic to many readers, and sometimes disregarded by reviewers and scholarly critics. Charting the salient reappearing conflicts, unsettling descriptions, protagonist decay, and potent techniques for registering horror that resurface in Global War on Terror imaginative media, we will see how the peculiar and affecting Gothic tensions in the works can be further understood by trauma theory, a term coined by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996, 72). Though I concentrate on developments in trauma theory from the mid 1995 to 2022, I also address its theoretical antecedents: from the earliest voices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that linked mental illness to a trauma (Charcot, Janet, Breuer, Freud) to researchers from mid-twentieth century (Adler, Lindemann) who studied how catastrophe affects civilian minds not previously trained to either fight war or withstand cataclysm. Always keeping at the fore of our minds the ancient Greek double-meaning of trauma as both unhealing “wound” and “defeat,” this study surveys tenets of the trauma theorists from the very first of those who studied the effects on civilian survivors of disaster (of what is still the largest nightclub fire in U.S. history, which replaced front page coverage of World War II for a few days: the Cocoanut Grove blaze) up to those trauma theorists writing now. As we will see, the concepts evolving behind trauma theory provide a powerful tool for searching into the surprising yearnings hiding behind the appearance of doppelgängers, possession ghosts, terrorists as monsters, empty coffins, and visitants that appear to feed on characters’ sorrow, guilt, and loneliness within the storytelling media under discussion.

I want to reappraise the dominant idea in trauma studies of the mid-1990s, namely that trauma victims often cannot fully remember and articulate their physical and psychic wounds. My argument is that, true to part of the theories of the Caruthian school, the perpetrators and victims in these novels may not express their trauma completely and in a linear fashion. However, the victims and perpetrators figured in these novels *do* relate the horrors of their memory to a degree by letting their narration erupt with the unexpectedly Gothic images, tropes, visions, language, and typical contradictions, aporias, lacunae, and paradoxes. The Gothic, one might say,

becomes the language in which trauma speaks and articulates itself, albeit not always in the most cogent of signs. One might easily dismiss these fleeting Gothic presences that characters conjure in the fictions under consideration as anomalous apparitions signaling nothing. However, if we interrogate these ghostly traces of Gothicism, we will find what secrets the characters and their dead friends hold. Working from the insights of psychoanalysis and its post-Freudian re-inventors and challengers, I aim to puzzle out the dimensions of characters' mourning in this trauma-gothic reading of the texts. Characters' use of the Gothic becomes their way of remembering, a coded language to the curious. I hold that unexpressed grief and guilt are the large constant in this imaginative media grouping. Characters' grief articulation and guilt release, or the desire for symbolic amnesia, take paths that the figures often were suspicious of before 9/11: a return to organized religion, a belief in spirits, a call for vengeance, psychotherapy, substance abuse, splitting with a partner, rampant sex with nearby strangers, and bloody torture of unlikely suspects. No closure arrives for characters, but other forms of recompense do come from these searches for elusive peace and the nostalgic longing for the America that has been lost to them.

Throughout the vast and diverse field of contemporary trauma studies, it still may be that Cathy Caruth is most frequently cited, echoed, affirmed, expanded, deconstructed, denounced, or disputed. Trauma for Caruth, a concept probably most clearly stated in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and consistently adhered to throughout her later works, is "a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self, and the world and that causes great emotional anguish in the individual" (Caruth 1996, 3–4). With disruptions in temporality come breakage in memory, and lost memory affects individuals' identities. This is much the same concept affirmed and applied in Caruth's other works, including a psychoanalytical and history-themed issue of *American Imago* (1991), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013). However, as the works analyzed here will demonstrate, GWOT narratives supplement Caruth's definition of trauma with a new "experience of time," adding a sense of "emotional anguish" and the presence of the dead to usher a change in identity in those who survive. In the seventeenth-century sense of the word, trauma is not a self-inflicted wound (*OED*) but a blow or injury from the outside. We will keep that outside sense in mind (as in the outside attack of Al Qaeda upon New York City), though we must also attend and analyze the self-inflicted wounds by these GWOT media characters (from substance abuse to risky

sexual behaviors, to suicide attempts). We must include another seldom mentioned shade of trauma's meaning: that of "defeat" (*OED*).

In Caruth's opening summary of trauma, distilled from the American Psychological Association's diagnosis of thousands of patients suffering Posttraumatic Stress Disorder first indexed in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980, appear terms that the Gothic itself uses as motifs: "The pathology consists [in its ...] reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 1995, 4–5). But besides obsession and possession, Caruth relates a number of other recurring symptoms of trauma including re-enactment, paralysis, shock and belatedness (delayed response to unexpected or overwhelming violence), guilt, disrupted memory, loss of identity, nostalgia, meditation on ruin, nightmares and sleeplessness, and increased arousal, not necessarily sexual, but what the *DSM-V* diagnoses as "hypervigilance, loss of temper, hyperactivity, exaggerated startle reflexes" (American Psychological Association 2013; Caruth 2014). All of these forms of suffering and affliction appear in the trauma works to be analyzed here, and in most other trauma works to which the argument, in passing, makes reference, including works detailing schizophrenia, substance abuse, sexual molestation, extreme parental neglect, or human trafficking and smuggling. In GWOT media (comics, film, novels, and video games), as in the Gothic, there remains a definite pattern of repeating motifs. 9/11 as well as the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq are splintering forces, causing wounds that people can barely understand and then struggle to articulate as the memories of trauma intrude like a second attack without warning, and usually compelling characters to go inward to an unhealthy and isolating degree. But the Gothic is one of the most impulsive and adaptive of sub-genres, able to split and reform the cells of texts in other categories, routinely combining with Westerns, quests and adventures, mysteries and detective stories, war accounts, shudder tales, romances, melodramas, science fiction dystopias, and even merging for moments with otherwise safely banal contemporary realism (Olson 2011). And the Gothic has no one predictable setting or abode: flourishing in tundra (*30 Days of Night*) or in the tropics (*Wide Sargasso Sea*), in crowded streets (*Dracula*) or barren wastes (*Frankenstein*; *Cold Skin*), and even into deepest outer space (*Lifeforce*), it seems to slouch, creep, fly, or crawl to places it should not be, and therein lies the mode's vitality: the

possibility for unpredictability when so much else has been charted in the sub-genre it enters (Olson 2011). Like all damnable and persistent things, like COVID viruses themselves, it likes to range. And now in recent American storytelling, as we are about to see, the Gothic creates an alluring synergy when it fuses with trauma narratives, especially GWOT ones, expressing the ineffable, unfaceable, and uncapturable.

Caruth's influential ideas have presented intriguing challenges and tensions. Among the most articulate dissenters are Ruth Leys with her questioning of the tyranny of using "Western-inspired notions of trauma and PTSD" for Caruth's concepts (Leys 2000, 17; Leys 2009); Dominick LaCapra (2001) with disagreement over what he sees as the essentialist and non-historical underpinnings to Caruth's interpretations; Roger Luckhurst (2008) who wonders about how "unknown" the wound really is and whether Caruth solves the contradiction of how one can be affected by something but not know it; and Michelle Satterlee (formerly Balaev) (2012) who consistently contests the marginalization of nature and spatial particularity in Caruth's formulations. While this study does not propose a new model for the reading of transmedia trauma, it does engage with relevant theoretical debates within trauma studies, where relevant.

For more of an index on the lasting debates arising within contemporary trauma theory, see Michelle Balaev's lucid yet not reductive, "Trends in Trauma Theory" (2012), Marinella Rodi-Risberg's probing "*The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (book review)" (2001), Susannah Radstone's polemical "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics" (2007), and Oxford University's up to date and extensive, "Oxford Bibliographies" with the subject "Trauma Theory" and "Trauma Psychology" (2022). One of the longer treatments most interested in trauma theory's handling of paradoxes and aporias and how these are leading to dissenting schools is Roger Luckhurst's highly reflective *The Trauma Question* (2008). An interesting study that makes a case for the writing of trauma and applies trauma theory on *Beowulf* to twenty-first century texts is Ted Morrissey's *Trauma Theory as an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts: An Updated and Expanded Edition, with Readings* (2021).

My primary contribution to the study of trauma lies in its account of a predominant transmedia concern that remains, for the most part, overlooked by this body of theoretical works, namely, its numerous points of thematic and conceptual overlaps with Gothic studies, not least of all in those characters who are not only possessed by "image or event" but also by a spirit (or spirits) of the dead.

To judge whether survivors (in fiction or reality) can fully remember intense or overwhelming violence done to them and then articulate it, I witness the fractious debates within trauma theory between psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, literary theorists, and neuroscientists and let those debates inform my conceptual framework. That framework is that par-anormally pathological moments as yet undiagnosed in the GWOT creative works may hold the most discoveries on how victims recollect and transmit trauma. Sightings peculiar, unnerving, and scream-inducing for the PTSD survivor form a revealing map of secrets, symbols, and metaphors, which finally lets the trauma (the recent and the past) be spoken. These fictional victims and perpetrators express the alarming violations and traumatic aftermath using Gothic tropes, situations, and characters in their expressions. If we understand the Gothic allusions, practices, and experiences, we begin to understand the formerly sealed traumas that the GWOT recalls and releases.

If a receptive audience exists for a volume like this, I believe it is due to some of the fine studies that are beginning to pave the way on the ambiguities of the twenty-first century counter-terrorism, including Terence McSweeney's *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). What also is increasing interest in examining Gothic Global War on Terror media are steady representations and adaptations of terror and anti-terror measures in fiction, film, network TV, and streaming platforms of HBO/Netflix/Amazon/Hulu Series (including from 2018–2022, *Fall and Rise; Informer; Homeland; Jack Ryan; Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror; 9/11: One Day in America; 9/11: Inside the President's War Room; The Report; and NYC Epicenters 9/11→2021½*). Many college classes (and some high school classes) now include creative works on the GWOT, all suggesting considerable and growing demand for studies on the subject. The sad rise of heightened intimidation, injury, and death from right-wing terrorism and anarchic movements around the world, and especially in America on January 6, 2021, during the siege on the Capitol Building, is also entering the discourse of college classes. Libraries are purchasing more books dealing with spikes in terror, as people want to understand and explain their world's instability and violence, especially as global warming and other real phenomena have endangered water supplies, cancelled disaster readiness and restoration attempts, and moved out whole communities from lower elevations, some coastal areas, and fire-likely locales. We cannot forget that even Osama bin Laden used Global Warming as one more

complaint against the West and pretext for violence in at least four of his conferences, trying to increase anger even to a greater degree in the Arab world and among Muslims worldwide against America.

The twentieth memorialization of 9/11 at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum (and elsewhere) encouraged scholars, educators, and students to seek more meditations on the sudden destruction that eventually changed so many people's lives. The attack that felled the Twin Towers (leaving a fire burning in its foundations for an astonishing one hundred days) and killed almost three thousand people would also precipitate pre-emptive attacks on sovereign nations, invasions, civil wars, and refugee crises that eclipsed the first disaster. Many political and military experts and laypeople reasonably fear a full-on terrorist resurgence in Afghanistan and Iraq from ISIS and Al-Qaeda, a return to the violence that scars nations and threatens the West again (Jones 2022). When we remember the missing towers, the spectre of another 9/11, and a calamitous new series of American-led counterattacks always haunts our future.

No academic book yet approaches this particular set of GWOT artifacts, despite the critical and commercial popularity of some of them, so such a study seems overdue. These stories reveal the tragic and the lost; they contend with the unknown and the eerily sublime. The ghosts inside them tug at us, and who can ignore a ghost? According to Barnes&Noble.com, two of the most popular genres in the last 20 years were Histories along with the Gothic romance shaded with ghosts, and much of the works this study encompasses are part of their combined weird ilk. This is a study of what is said to have happened, what really happened, what ghosts want, and what we want from the ghosts. As all of us lose someone we love, we can relate to that question. If you lose someone suddenly to a violent death, as experience has shown me, that question of where the loved one goes becomes more insistent as time goes by. To track how and why these novels have a Gothic life, then, is to give the trauma a human voice, and that is what I endeavor to hear and transcribe and interpret, listening for how trauma affects characters' recall, speech, beliefs, hope, relationships, and behaviors. Furthermore, exploring how narratives are formed, what the Gothic is, and how trauma operates all will create a wider band of interested parties in deciphering the GWOT works. This book aims to appeal to creative writers making their own stories, as well to be useful to psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists measuring the effects on the mind from the aftereffects of a tragedy witnessed as it happened by one-third of the world (Wallace 2020, 26) and two lengthy wars

that killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. It hopes to have meaning for sociologists, cultural theorists, scholars of war, and historians wanting an interpretation on how the tragedy and the invasions and occupations changed our hearts, our culture, and American decision-making. However, while GWOT storytelling does have a reputation for being cryptic, non-linear, flashback-oriented, gap-filled, and unresolved in its endings, it does not mean that my commentary should be obscure, too. I wish to assist the widest spectrum of readers. The aim, as with my other studies, is to avoid the unkindness of jargon, the murk of excessive formality, the weakness of endless qualification, and the boredom of hair-splitting meant purely for super-specialists. Hopefully, the approachable style of this book will follow those fascinating volumes on trauma from my betters that continue to be read and that I cite. An Israeli scholar of terrorism, invasion, and occupation (like those continuations of the Arab-Israeli conflict), Raya Morag, recognizes a shift: she says that socially, culturally, and psychologically we are moving “from the ‘era of the witness’ to the era of the ‘perpetrator’” (Morag 2020). Watching that shift is a pursuit of this book, as well. This new study could be for all readers who want more background and inquiry to the effects of counter-terrorism on survivors via the prism of America’s pre-eminent creative works.

In summary, this project aims to trace a pattern in select GWOT storytelling. That pattern is that there is a tendency in the better known GWOT works of imagination to fixate on the ghostly, the doppelgängers, and other hauntingly Gothic forms. I draw on existing scholarship not only on Trauma Theory but also from Gothic Studies to articulate this pattern and, in doing so, to reveal insights about what this fixation on the ghostly—and Gothic unease and disease, and of tortures in faraway dark cells—might reveal about the experience of the GWOT more broadly. In investigating these prime examples of GWOT storytelling listed in the table of contents, we must confront and interrogate what inhabits their pages, frames, or screens. Those would be cold-blooded killers, eerie twins, doubles, mad professors, crazed doctors, unhinged military supervisors, troubled orphans, ghost ancestors, witches, were-creatures, monsters of hidden places, creepy cryptozoologists, secret society masters, violent sufferers of extreme anti-social personality disorder (formerly termed psychopaths and sociopaths), weird practitioners of magic sex, and the bodies of those raped and killed and coming back from the dead. What the ghostly and weird gives us from that lot is what is missing in many trauma accounts: in trauma narratives, when victims die, they only seem to

reappear again in records, on tombstones, within dreams, and in flashbacks. But in this select range of premier GWOT storytelling or traumagothic works, the missing picture is made more complete. We continue to watch victim–perpetrator encounters after death from unscheduled meetings with the ghost, meetings that enlarge and complicate the words, acts, and traumatic bond they had when both were still alive. Such fraught interactions, exceptional and moving and worldview-jarring, are the heart of this study.

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PART II

Novels



CHAPTER 2

Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006): Terrorism, Lovers, & WTC Apparitions

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In March 2001, the Washington state novelist and frequent *Playboy* fiction contributor Jess Walter was headed to Gotham. Harper Collins had hired him as a memoir ghostwriter for the acting New York City Police Commissioner, Bernard Bailey Kerik. Six months later, with this project finished—*The Lost Son: A Life in Pursuit of Justice* (Kerik 2002)—Kerik's and Walter's lives would take an unthinkable turn, and a far bigger story exploded than anything in the Police Commissioner's complimentary memoir.¹

¹ Correspondence to me from Jess Walter (11 February 2020) establishes a New York City dateline: "In 2001, I was working on a novel, *Citizen Vince*, that was partly set there, and that featured a NY cop as a secondary character. My publisher at the time, Judith Regan, had just signed the police commissioner, Bernard Kerik, to a book deal. I signed on to help him write his book ... and used the opportunity to spend some time in New York for my own work, too.

I stayed on the Upper West Side for a week or two here and there throughout the late spring, summer and the early fall of 2001. Kerik's book was done when the attacks happened and I returned to New York September 16 or 17 and stayed another couple of weeks before coming home in early October. (Probably total, two months ...) I spent several days during that last trip at Ground Zero, most of my time with another cop I'd met, who almost died there that day ... those disturbing experiences and the surreal nature of being the ghost writer for Giuliani's police commissioner—were the seeds for *The Zero*" (Walter 2020).

Days after the Al-Qaeda assault, Walter would walk to Ground Zero with a rank and file NYPD officer who had nearly died on 9/11. They would wind through the World Trade Center's gigantic rubble as smoke rose above bodies still trapped under gigantic beams in the fire that would burn underground for a year. Walter's weeks thereafter near "the Hole" inspire the novel we examine now, or as he wrote to me: "those disturbing experiences and the surreal nature of being the ghost writer for [New York City Mayor] Giuliani's police commissioner were the seeds for [my own 9/11 novel] *The Zero*" (Walter email). Recording Kerik's remarks and reactions to the disaster, Walter sensed then that his memoir subject was more like a supremely powerful crime boss, and he would fictionalize Kerik as the "Capo dei Capi" moving in the shadows of Gotham's discontent in his *The Zero* (2006). This Godfather-likening is a prescient view, considering that nine years later, Walter's boss—once dubbed "America's Cop"—would serve a prison sentence of over three years for multiple lying and bribery charges. Kerik almost seems like one of the corrupt police officials on the take from Director Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005). Deeply embarrassing President George W. Bush in 2004 who had nominated him as U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, the disgraced commissioner would himself characterize the disgrace in a Gothic vein: as "dying with your eyes open" (Kerik 2015). Thus, Walter's intense involvement with the New York Police Department at the highest levels and his presence at the smoldering WTC crater that swallowed two buildings half-a-mile high help explain the uncommonly fine and almost privileged detail in *The Zero*. Bolstering research for his narrative, Walter attended and recorded briefings of city commissioners held by Mayor Rudy Giuliani in the days following the destruction, 18 years before Giuliani would become the embattled lead legal advisor to ex-President Trump, defending him from porn stars' defamation suits and advocating for him over "stolen" elections. Walter's access to Gotham's city bosses and insider's view of their decision-making may explain the generally appreciative reviews that the novel received for its intimately detailed vision of the competition, corruption, and confusion within New York City bureaucracy at the moment of epic disaster and afterward. But though that jaded realism should be appreciated for all its completeness, Walter's greater accomplishment may rest on his recasting the initial aftermath of the towers' destruction through a monstrous dream filter, one where Walter himself confesses that the word "normal" became "familiar and strange, like a repressed memory" to himself (Walter 2006, 7). To theorize about these defamiliarizing processes or the rise of the uncanny in the novel, to track

the movement of ghosts and acts of torture in this narrative, to decode the Gothicized language of flashbacks, to investigate the power of the terror to warp survivors' morality and ethics, to show how the desire for vengeance incites murder by individuals and by states, and last to determine how the missing return like a virus is the weird business of this chapter.

Like his fiction from the year before (*Citizen Vince*, which won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best novel) that features a New York cop as a secondary character, *The Zero* and its cop-protagonist received high praise. Porochista Khakpour, a 9/11 novelist herself who wrote *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* in 2007, ranked *The Zero* as "one of the top ten international novels written of the attack" for *The Guardian* (Khakpour 2014). Deirdre Donahue found the narrative "a dark allegory about the attack, the aftermath, and what has happened to America as seen through the prism of one man's nightmarish journey" (Donahue 2006). So too did staff at international newspapers, including Toronto's *The Globe and Mail*, give the highest critical approval, judging the novel "a chronicle of the United States' disintegrating post-9/11 polity" (Staff 2006). Concurring, Jeremy Leipter of the *Calgary Herald* interpreted *The Zero* as exposing how "we allowed ourselves to be anaesthetized [towards an] irrational reaction to events that will define our generation" (Leipter 2006). Though less effusive in its praise, *The Washington Post* gave a lucid description of the plot: "During bouts of mysterious memory loss, [police officer] Remy has been enlisted by a secret organization involved in tracking down a woman named March Selios, who worked in one of the towers but may have survived. What ensues is a cross-country hunt for clues and Remy's growing suspicion that he is committing unspeakable acts during his blackouts" (McNally 2006). Early on, then, reviewers focused on the conspiracy aspects of Walter's fiction, which I would like to expand here. Conspiracies breed in *The Zero* when someone impossibly survives the attack while the rest of his or her office perishes, surviving perhaps by being tipped off by someone close to the Al Qaeda plotters. Officer Remy himself loses consciousness 30 times in the narrative, including at the 9/11 site where he defies the odds and survives the Towers' fall. Of course, terrorist incidents and trauma theory are replete with cases of severe blows and mental intrusions, amnesia and the resulting lacunae in lives. The questions from *The Washington Post* are still provocative ones, though, to address, for example: "What is Remy's role in this secret organization; why does he continue doing what he's doing?" (McNally 2006). This novel may directly explain little, but it is better for that: its overarching ambiguities reflect the ambiguities of 9/11 itself; its doubting narrative heightens

dread and emotion. The thorn in the heart of all 9/11 literature is an unsolved mystery, asking in particular, where are the bodies from the towers? Moreover, never finding the WTC living or dead that both Walter and his protagonist Brian Remy desperately searched for helps the Hole become the unofficial and authentic memorial to the unknown civilian in an age of sudden cataclysmic terrorism.

AUTOIMMUNITY DISEASE

In her characterization of early media reviews other than the ones raised above, the 9/11 scholar Kristine A. Miller stresses the terrorism texts' allegorical readings: "Although no sustained scholarship on *The Zero* has yet been published, reviewers have focused on how the troubled, inarticulate Remy symbolically represents America's post-9/11 trauma" (Miller 2014, 30). Though Walter's protagonist Remy may indeed represent a nation and a world wounded, lost, confused and growing blindly cruel, he is also markedly different, in that he is an insider, a first responder to the tragedy. It is true that the world watched on live television in shock,² but few people actually went into the North Tower after the attack on a rescue mission, as Officer Remy did, and so few have the amplified traumata that he has, namely, injury to body and his very identity, which we need to unravel. No one ever sees film footage from inside the WTC during the

²Fifteen years later, the continued relevance of 9/11 phantasms would appear for record-audiences to watch live during U.S. Republican Primaries from 2015 to 2016. One candidate, Donald J. Trump, recalled seeing "thousands and thousands" of Muslims on rooftops in New Jersey celebrating, dancing, chanting, and singing on the day the WTC fell, and another, Ben Carson, soon said he saw the same. When interviewers pressed both candidates the following week, both held to their stories, which would prove to be either hallucinations or false memories. Carson would finally recant his version of events, but President Trump has never wavered from what he imagined he saw: "It did happen. I saw it. It was on television. I saw it. There were people that were cheering on the other side of New Jersey where you have large Arab populations. They were cheering as the World Trade Center came down. I know it might be not politically correct for you to talk about it, but there were people cheering as that building came down" (Kiely 2015). Trump lays the blame for why no corroboration emerges and why there is a continued lack of evidence on a coordinated media attempt to discredit him. Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop ended the discussion by complaining, "Trump has memory issues" (Phelps 2015). As yet to be investigated by trauma scholars is the effect of TV viewing of a trauma on policy makers at the highest American level, and what their imaginary sightings inspire them to do, as revealed by their later letters, diaries, interviews, and conferences. To date, New Jersey police, governor, and community leaders still deny these "catastrophe parties" ever happened, and no witnesses to the Muslim celebrations of death have surfaced besides former President Trump.

attack, Jacques Derrida claimed in a long interview with Giovanna Borradori, and the living witnesses sometimes cannot articulate it. It's more accurate to say now that there is not much film footage, but some does exist. The French brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet were shooting a documentary on a rookie firefighter in Manhattan on 9/11, and actually capture rare footage of the first plane cutting into the North Tower, and one of the brothers accompanies the firefighters inside the North Tower, filming all the way and even providing light to the firefighters from his camera, though he flinches as bodies fall next to him from the soaring heights and decides not to film them. Derrida's second claim, though, resembles the more penetrating trauma scholarship itself from the mid-1990s on. Early newspaper reviewers of *The Zero* detected what is "unpossessable" in the words of Kristiaan Versluys: "It is a limit event [trauma of global proportions] that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making" (Versluys 2009, 1). Additionally, though all of the protagonists surveyed in this book may inflict physical or emotional harm on themselves to some degree, Remy's suicide attempt on the first page is the most obvious and determined attempt at self-annihilation in any of the fictions investigated here. This text may be the best candidate from our 9/11 collated fictions for interpretation through Derrida's extremely original post-9/11 auto-immunity concept developed in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003). Both people and superpowers, Derrida contends, can act like a body's overactive immune system attacking its own healthy tissues, a distinguishing feature of incompletely understood diseases like "diabetes (type 1), idiopathic arthritis, glomerulonephritis, Graves' disease, Guillain-Barré syndrome, ... Multiple sclerosis, primary biliary cirrhosis, psoriasis, [and] rheumatoid arthritis" (National Institutes of Health 2022).

Let us consider provocative Derrida's argument, one that looks backward from the terrorism of 2001 to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 for historical support. To give some sense of history, I quote him at length:

Immigrated, trained, prepared for their act in the United States by the United States, these [9/11] hijackers incorporate, so to speak, two suicides in one: their own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal Autoimmunitary [Translator's spelling] aggression—and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed, and trained them. For let us not forget that the United States had in effect paved the way for and consolidated the forces of the "adversary" by training

people like bin Laden, who would here be the most striking example, and by first of all creating the politico-military circumstances that would favor their emergence and their shifts in allegiance (for example, the alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Muslim countries in its war against the Soviet Union or Russia in Afghanistan—though one could endlessly multiply examples of these suicidal paradoxes).³ (Derrida 2003)

Derrida's impressive analogy of a self-induced disease illuminates many corridors of *The Zero*, which after all begins with a self-induced gunshot wound to the head. We may in fact see a tripartite model of terror at work within *The Zero*, one revealing that terror and trauma do not wholly come from outside. For this novel, the terror comes from (1) a belief in conspiracy theories that help lead to a suicide attempt by the protagonist, (2) the traumatic sufferings of the torturer looking back upon his torturing, and (3) accessories and affiliates of Al Qaeda that either the U.S. federal government initially trained and funded (in the case of the WTC destruction, a claim the CIA resolutely but unconvincingly denies) or Walter's "New York City Office of Recovery and Liberty" (ORL henceforth).

The ORL bribes young Arab Muslim men to become informants. These informants, acting much as they do in John Updike's 9/11 novel *Terrorist* released in the same year as *The Zero*, become ultimately disaffected agents because of all the U.S.-sanctioned abuse they witness in their positions. Thus in Remy we have a city law officer who, somewhat magically, gets promoted to the rank of anti-terror agent and informant procurer; grand interrogator; torturer of suspects through beating, suffocation, and not mere waterboarding but drowning in the ocean; and then

³ It is paramount for this analysis of anti-terrorism to have a definition of terrorism to work from or to deconstruct, and the CIA itself offers a definition of terrorism remarkably close to Derrida's (drawing from Title 22 of the US Code, Section 2656f/d). Terrorism is "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents. The term 'international terrorism' means terrorism involving the territory or the citizens of more than one country. The term 'terrorist group' means any group that practices, or has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism" (CIA Staff 2020) However, the CIA—despite widespread media coverage to the contrary and admissions by Al Qaeda officials themselves—continues to deny involvement with bin Laden during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan: "Numerous comments in the media recently have reiterated a widely circulated but incorrect notion that the CIA once had a relationship with Usama Bin Laden [sic]. For the record, you should know that the CIA never employed, paid, or maintained any relationship whatsoever with Bin Laden" (CIA Staff 2020). Moreover, ominously replaying the righteous language of the Mayor in *The Zero*, former CIA director Leon Panetta vowed on the day of Bin Laden's death, "A war will be won. God bless the United States of America" (Panetta 2011).

arresting officer at gatherings of Al Qaeda terror cells in their (mock) preparation for suicide bombing. However, in the desire to protect the Homeland, the pre-emptive actions of Remy lead to the active radicalization of actual operatives—a suicide bombing at a New York train station ensues after the wrongful arrest of those who were actually informants. The killing of Remy's lover by an Al Qaeda operative occurs, all done by a man who was for a while a U.S. government agent, code-named Jaguar. This is a version of the fatally ironic, futile, and damning history that Derrida gives of the U.S.'s Middle East policies through his notion of autoimmunity, but exemplified in fiction, rather than purely the “blowbacks”⁴ of contemporary U.S. history that Derrida analyzes.

Indeed, of all of the GWOT works studied here, *The Zero*, like the digit zero itself that the engineer/terrorist Jaguar meditates upon, is the most radically uncertain. It is difficult to tell what in the narrative is fever dream, hallucination, hospital drug-induced vision, trauma shock, or “real.” Is the hero on a special and secret anti-terrorist mission from The Boss, apparently the Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani (the one who would traumatize a nation when at the Washington Mall he incited a mob by bellowing “Trial by Combat” into a microphone to crowd gathered to disrupt the electoral vote counting on January 6, 2021), or is he severely injured early on by entrance into the WTC and his memory traumatized, quietly dreaming this entire narrative in a hospital bed?

Becky Ohlsen perceptively asks the purpose and effect of its many unfinished chapters and deliberate narrative evasions. I assume that evasiveness includes how the novel jump cuts from flashes of torture, to a painful talk with an ex-wife, to a son delivering a eulogy to the father (Remy) standing alive before him, to clandestine envelope deliveries, to the collection of

⁴First mentioned in a CIA document from 1954 in connection to fears regarding the American supported coup of the freely elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, “Blowback” is a “metaphor for the unintended consequences of the U.S. government’s international activities that have been kept secret from the American people” (Johnson 2001). Days after 9/11, a former CIA consultant during the 1960s–1970s named Chalmers Johnson would add this helpful analysis: “Terrorism by definition strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable. The United States deploys such overwhelming military force globally that for its militarized opponents only an ‘asymmetric strategy,’ in the jargon of the Pentagon, has any chance of success. When it does succeed, as it did spectacularly on September 11, it renders our massive military machine worthless: The terrorists offer it no targets” (Johnson 2001). The futile response of the U.S. military machine as described to actual sources of terror in response to the “asymmetric strategies” of terrorism, sadly reflect the damage of the anti-terror units in *The Zero*. They have no success and only breed more discontent among the underprivileged and alienated.

tons of “sensitive” paper from the WTC plaza and its surrounds (which includes a federal building that housed CIA offices), and then upon the bed where he makes love to a sister of his number-one suspect. As Ohlsen notes: The “flashes are usually accompanied by significant quantities of whiskey which, along with his brooding silence, his inferred toughness and other people’s failure to take his questions seriously, helps Remy skate along with his memory loss undetected. The structure of the novel calls to mind works like *Memento* or *Fight Club*, in which the disjointed plot must be pieced together based on mostly faulty evidence” (Ohlsen 2006). I would add to her apt film comparisons of disjointed structure and permanent doubt over protagonist actions (which may be all a dream) such films as *Life of Pi* (Dir. Ang Lee, 2012) *American Psycho* (Dir. Mary Harron, 2000), *Shutter Island* (Dir. Martin Scorsese, 2010), *Mulholland Drive* (Dir. David Lynch, 2001), *Jacob’s Ladder* (Dir. Adrian Lyne, 1990), and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2006). For Remy, these abrupt transitions without closure that Ohlsen references are a way of avoiding too long a gaze at the monster in the mirror, a shrinking away from unpleasant truths, or how the characters and the country embark on an erring, retaliatory, and warring path that will lead to more trauma and what philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls an “unmasterable past” (Habermas 2019). With, at best, “faulty evidence,” we begin now to extend Ohlsen’s analysis. From answering how much of what Remy remembers truly happened to him, so many other questions emerge: Why does he take part in torture and corruptions? And what are the lengths Remy (and others) go, as Derrida wonders of others in his dialogue with Borradori, in order to “attenuate or neutralize the effect of the traumatism (to deny, repress, or forget it, to get over 9/11)?” (Derrida 2003).

Both newspaper reviews and scholarly journal articles reasonably suggest that *The Zero* is a satire intended to mock and critique reactions to 9/11 and to criticize Americans for attacking non-involved countries and stigmatizing Arabs at home.⁵ What is problematic, though, is how all of

⁵The novel is undeniably a critique of mindless war. The first target or war-buffoon may be Steve, the man who marries Remy’s ex-wife. Opening up a can of beer at a “wake” for Remy, Steve declares, “Personally? I don’t see that it matters who we bomb, long as we do it while we still got the upper hand. Line ’em up. Clean house. But I don’t need to tell you that, right?... We should have had the stealth bombers in the air before the smoke cleared” (Walter 2006, 26). The protagonist, who comes to his own “wake” organized by his “grieving” son and searches for bodies in the ruin, can only counter such warlike assurance and swagger with the fact that the smoke has *not* yet cleared from the WTC.

these critics take at face value Remy's entire musings about a federal and state government-funded organization in New York City that is pitting informants to kill each other. If this were so, the Mayor of Gotham would also be guilty of presiding over a scheme to funnel more money to city government, all for an organization that supposedly tracks, disrupts, and kills terrorists (and purportedly is in a jurisdiction war with the FBI and CIA). Book reviewers do not dismiss this as a paranoid dream-phantasy of the injured Remy, yet I would argue it is. The hunt and capture of these faux-terrorists constantly borders absurdity. So many false leads mount that that one secret-agent partner with Remy, Agent Markham of the ORL, finally cries over yet another ruined mission: "Oh, for Christ's sake... We've got informers on the informers!" (Walter 2006, 293). In reviews so far, there is a less than questioning stance towards Remy's "secret missions," and a somewhat naïve acceptance of his spying as an actual happening outside his imagination. From this lack of skepticism towards the protagonist come some very free interpretations.

First, to suppose that the New York Mayor's office would hire Remy (formerly a mid-level liaison between the city attorney's office and police department) to be an undercover operative against hidden radical Muslims on terror destinies is extremely unlikely. To begin, we notice Remy has no training in eavesdropping or computer decryption, he has no skills with Middle Eastern languages, nor in interrogation. Last, he has serious vision problems, having just gone blind in one eye and suffering macular degeneration and vitreous detachment in the other. None of his skills, training, or education would qualify him for the job, and his potential to be a liability to secrecy—routinely endangering the lives of others through his unintentional negligence, naïveté, and forgetfulness—is ominously high. That said, New York City does have an anti-terrorist operation, one that even works outside the city, hosting field offices in Europe and the Middle East. The New York City Police department radically changed after 9/11 and massive funding was shifted to it, so in that aspect the novel is not sheer fantasy. As Brad Reagan describes the New York City organization in the year of this novel's release, "At 51,000 strong, the NYPD employs more than 1.5 times as many people as the FBI, and its anti-terrorism initiative is a synchronized effort between the department's Intelligence Division and the Counter Terrorism Bureau" (Reagan 2006). The ultra-secret force that seems to employ Remy does bear some resemblance to "the Hercules teams [within the Intelligence Division], which are composed of specialist cops rotated in from throughout the force. The effort even

stretches far from New York, with nine liaisons assigned to such overseas hot spots as Tel Aviv, Israel; Amman, Jordan; and London” (Reagan 2006). Knowing more about the NYPD’s huge and assertive ATI (Anti-Terrorism Initiative) through Walter’s working with Kerik gives the author an admirable sense for the realities of tracking terrorism, but the plot mainspring of a fierce rivalry between the NYPD counter-terrorism bureau and the FBI and CIA seems to show more his powers of invention than reality. Sub-departments such as the NYPD/FBI Joint Terrorist Task Force join together, instead of operating as separate and competing entities (Reagan 2006). My argument, then, is that it makes less sense to hold a literal reading of the novel’s action of organizational rivalries. Such an indiscriminating acceptance of the story would mean that the mayor hires a hopelessly traumatized man, Brian Remy, in the hopes of making money and gaining more power. Yet Remy makes for an agent-candidate who seems to have no memory of previous conversations with the Mayor,⁶ who mostly asks “What?” and “Who?”, who seems silent much of the rest of the time and who has (as Remy readily admits) shot himself in the head a week before with the wound still visible. An individual like Remy would be

⁶The novel imagines that the New York City Mayor engineers a scheme to extract federal funds through exaggerated reports of post-9/11 Al Qaeda plots in his city. In reality, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, just three months after 9/11, did actually speculate in “terror futures.” In December 2001, he wrote to the New York City Conflicts of Interest Board asking permission to begin forming an international consulting firm with three members of his outgoing administration (Solomon and Mosk 2016). This firm would specialize in protection from terrorism for governments that could pay the fees. However, some of his clients included states whose own government officials also sponsored or shielded Al Qaeda operatives. In 2007, just one year into his bid for the U.S. presidency, Giuliani would have to step down (at least temporarily) as head of the terror-security company he started, Giuliani Partners. Raising suspicions, his company “had secured a contract with Qatar to provide security assessments for that country’s lucrative oil infrastructure” (Jacoby 2007). However, “factions within the [existing] Qatari government” that Giuliani Partners worked with had previously “tipped off” Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in 1996 to leave the country before FBI agents were to arrive and apprehend him there (Jacoby 2007). Mr. Mohammed would go on to become “the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks,” according to the *9/11 Commission Report*. Walter’s fictional conspiracy theories in *The Zero* take on a patina of truth with Giuliani’s career post-9/11.

Metaphorically, then, Mayor Rudy Giuliani was caught with his pants down long before he tried to take them off at Manhattan’s Mark Hotel for a faux-Kazak journalist/Borat’s 15-year-old virgin daughter (actually Maria Bakalova, nominated for an Oscar in her performance) in *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Woliner 2020).

an extreme risk in an undercover operation that demands subtlety; quickness of mind; keen memory for faces, names, speech, locales; and a strong idea for what his next move in the operation is. Remy is a gravely suffering trauma victim and possesses none of these necessary abilities above. This officer cannot articulate what he saw at the day of destruction, but he can show us the effect of his PTSD. Through the ruins of his dreams and the threatening figures of his paranoia we see the effects of trauma, though not what the actual traumata were.

Beyond the inability to express the trauma, the second obsession in *The Zero* is absence: the missing people and missing documents (paper records from the WTC that flew away or incinerated in the blast; paper suggesting terrorist involvements and connections; and paper trails of criminality from the Mayor's office, along with other New York law enforcement officials). An endless search for human remains ensues, and as in real life, only the tiniest fragments surface, leaving well over 1000 bodies still unidentified and untraceable. Readers may wonder at the amount of attention and scrutiny that this novel gives to mere paper, yet these inscribed, half burned pieces of paper awaiting decoding are a metaphor for the retrieved portions of 9/11 cadavers. Just as Derrida argued that titles in the archive cataloguing system represent knowledge but are not the whole works, so too these burned names and body pieces represent personal identities but are not the whole identities. At once complete and incomplete, this search for detail or an authoritative archive of the names of the 9/11 victims is an even more intense agony and malady than is presented in Derrida's original essay (later turned into a book), "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." In "Archive Fever," we remember, the malady for completion consumes: "It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest from searching for the archive right where it slips away" (Derrida 1995, 57). Furthermore, Derrida detects "an incessant tension here between the archive and archaeology," bringing to mind Freud's interest in the excavation of antiquities and his sustained analogy of unearthing physical artifacts in the earth to the raising of buried wounds, drives, and longings sedimented in the psyche. Likewise, it has been a search "one goddamned bucket at a time" (Walter 2006, 17) for human remains in *The Zero*, as Remy calls it. Gathering all the pieces and interpreting them correctly could establish identity; close missing persons' reports; clear ambiguity; start the mourning, rituals, ceremonies for families, friends, and coworkers of the deceased; and provide an object for the otherwise empty coffins. But the human remains, like the sheets of paper that fall on 9/11, are

mostly burned and incomplete. No one decodes the paper contents, and no one clears the ambiguous status of the disappeared people. Bringing up the pieces will affect the body-retrievers' minds profoundly, but not bringing up enough bodies will affect them more. And yet in this novel, the key therapist Dr. Rieux will not energetically excavate minds through psychotherapy, but instead prescribe medication. Though termed a therapist, he acts more like a psychiatrist with more recourse to pharmaceuticals than "talking cures."

From the eighteenth century onward, the Gothic has been the literature of absent things—missing papers (of lineage, deed, ownership, and court) and absent people (heirs and lovers, fathers and criminals and brides). *The Zero* sutures itself to this tradition by conducting searches for missing people (the woman March who may have been tipped off by a terrorist friend to exit the North Tower minutes before the crash, abandoning the thousands to be pulverized before any warning could come) and missing papers (the documents flying out of the WTC that this novel's New York City Mayor oddly claims are central to retrieving for reviving the U.S. economy, and also a secret harvest of documents related to a terror conspiracy). However, what unites *The Zero* even more intimately with the Gothic impulse is that these missing things are still full of agency. The sense in the text is that the dead are weirdly and quietly operative agents who possess the living, shame them, burden and break them, but sometimes liberate them, too. The living through their words and deeds, again and again, desire forgiveness from the ghosts of the dead for still living while so many others were vaporized on 9/11. To underscore that, each of these surveyed novels mentions that every breath of the New York City survivors robs something from the dead—the very essence or dust of the dead. A survivor guilt settles over all the narratives as unavoidably as the WTC explosions' gray ash cakes the living who flee from the burning and tumbling towers.

If Derrida's notion of an autoimmunity disease may be seen as deconstructing President George W. Bush's proclaimed division of Al Qaeda terrorism from the America's Global War on Terrorism, then Walter's *The Zero* decenters or readjusts who the ghost is, as well. The one who threatens, warns, disrupts is not always another, a stranger, a visitant from the land of the dead, or the Other, but at times the person who the reader often initially most identifies with, the protagonist himself. The traditional concept of a ghost, then, is taken apart, rebuilt, and left with parts missing in the process: the ghost's mission, motivation, and mourning relationship

is incomplete, unreadable, and contradictory. Indeed, in seeing the protagonist try to kill himself in the first pages to “save himself” and then not being able to die, we see something of Derrida’s proposal executed: “As we know, an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity” (Derrida 2003). Later, through a series of slips, gaffes, mis-timings, and misspoken words—these accidents that never were accidental—we could argue that Remy strips his spook status. It is a kind of suicide of his undercover-agent identity, and another autoimmunity attack is then underway within him.

In cinematic parallel, Remy reminds us first of one of the gritty, damaged vigilantes like The Comedian within the movie based on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ 1986–1987 comic *The Watchmen* and the HBO TV series of the same name (appeared in 2009 and 2019, respectively). He criminal behavior in the name of protecting New York City reminds us of the poster that protesters hold aloft in that movie: “*Who watches the Watchmen?*” But perhaps the protagonist who most resembles Remy (in his attack from within) is Jack Torrance from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). This autoimmunity victim/perpetrator/Overlook caretaker also has nightmares, memory lapses, sudden violence he cannot explain, a sense of possession, reincarnation, a lapse back into alcoholism, meetings with spirits no one else sees, and walks down halls with someone else’s blood on his shoes. The most interesting filmic nod is Remy’s time at “The Ghost Bar,” and how he himself parodies the ghost barman played with diabolical restraint in Kubrick’s *The Shining* by Joe Turkel. Two days after 9/11, Remy discovers a storefront not far away with broken windows and dusty tables but intact bottles of “decent gin.” It will be this abandoned bar he slinks into for much of the novel and wherein he encounters strange characters that will corrupt him later. When thinking himself alone in the bar, Remy looks for a clean glass, gazes upward and sees “a slender man in a dark suit [who] was standing in the doorway, holding a briefcase. He was younger than Remy, but about the same height, with a short, military haircut. But his exact age was hard to determine because he had the youngest face Remy had ever seen on an adult, as if a ten-year-old’s head had been grafted onto the body of an adult lawyer” (Walter 2006, 21). Agents such as the unknown man in the doorway combine the dark smoothness and efficiency of a John Le Carré (see particularly his novel of extraordinary rendition, *A Most Wanted Man* from 2008, based on the real-life tortures of the innocent Turkish-born Murat Kurnaz at American

detention camps in Kandahar and Guantanamo Bay) with the surrealism of a William Burroughs (particularly *Naked Lunch*, 1959) and the alarm of a Stephen King (especially in his 9/11 ghost novella from 2003, *The Things They Left Behind*). Strange heads from then on will become the weird and dreamlike constant in *The Zero*, from Remy's landlady's chatting head which was "just a fraction off-center, giving her the look of a ... Foosball goalie" to a decapitated head encountered during Remy's sifting duty at the landfill "under all this fuggin' steel on top and shit on the bottom" (Walter 2006, 6, 45). After such horrors comes a greater terror, a haunting in Remy of the kind that Derrida discusses no less than ten times in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*: that 9/11 bears on the "body the terrible sign of what might or perhaps will take place, which will be *worse than anything that has ever taken place*" (Derrida 2003). Trauma ruins all illusions of safety, and television (which most of the characters in *The Zero* frequently watch and discuss) enlarges the fear, reinforcing trauma's power of repetition. Avery F. Gordon enlarges this portentous Derridean sense when she writes that trauma always "binds you to what cannot be forgotten or forgiven ... [and] binds you to the repression of it. This repetition of and libidinal investment in the repression binds the future—what comes next—to the trauma, which is what never ends, what cannot end. In this sense, trauma is a deeply regressive and repressive state" (Gordon 1997). We might be reminded, as well, of Punter's apt "ricochet" delineation and the impact of endless replay on the television news of vengeful terrorism: granted, "the numbers of deaths in the Twin Towers ... Do not stack up statistically against ... The deaths of one million Filipinos in the US/Philippine War of 1900. But this, of course, is not the end, or perhaps even the beginning, of the truth: because terrorism depends on the effects of ricochet" (Punter 2008, 212). Thus, theorists establish well how the portents and omens of terrorism work, and my intention is to analyze, across the many disappearances of the living and the returns of the dead, how this novel binds us to what cannot be forgiven or forgotten—torture, concealments, omissions, and the inability to tell if we are alive among the living or if we are dead among the other phantoms. Remy, I would argue, is chiefly interesting in his professional contradictions and personal revolution. He converts into the villain of his own "heroic story." He also changes into the injured victim of 9/11 he sought to rescue, and thus transforms into the ghost of the tale he long searches for.

GHOSTS

It is defensible to see Remy's Kafkaesque confusion, doubt over whether he exists, and his vast conspiracy suspicions as a symptom of his trauma or of that paranoid thinking that understandably comes from an unprecedented attack which no one could understand at the time and few could process later. In his mental disarray of losing forever his friends and colleagues who died in rescue attempts at the WTC, Remy is like the real-life Marcy Borders, who escaped the 81st floor of the WTC on the day of attack. Photographed on the street leading away from the WTC in an image that became indelible of the tragedy, she would die of cancer in 2015, in part from exposure to the toxins in the air that day. The image of her evokes at first glance the dead from a museum—perhaps an Egyptian mummy initially, and then a Pompeian victim later, stopped in mid-stride by Vesuvius's hot ash and smoke. At second view, she may even appear as a jaundiced ghoul, but then she seems all too human as we gaze upon the broken and child-like face seeking explanation, comfort, and refuge. From 9/11 forward, Borders would suffer severe mental disruption, and until Borders' death at 42 years of age, she still "feared for her life that a missile might hit her. She began to drink, sometimes to the point of blacking out" (Lowe 2015, 59). When Borders would go to a parade with her daughter, she would run for cover upon hearing a plane overhead; when she saw a stranger on a roof, she thought it was Osama bin Laden in sniper mode, with his ever-ready AK-47, narrowing again upon her, not content until he killed her. Borders acts out what National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice felt: "Every day was September 12th: You got up and felt it might happen again" (Rice 2010).

As her *New York Times* obituary concludes, when her photo as The Dust Lady appeared in Arabic newspapers, the "fame increased her paranoia. She believed Osama bin Laden was not done. He would not stop with the WTC; he would pursue her" (Bromwich 2015). True to her terror, what awaited her was Derrida's "unpresentable future" (Derrida 2003). What shadowed The Dust Lady is what shadows Brian Remy: fear, confusion, eroding identity, paranoia, and unspeakable delusions. I contend it is that dread combined with survivor guilt and repression (along with those things that cannot successfully be repressed) that bedevil him and that helped kill Marcy Borders. It is not only the sleep of reason that produces monsters in 9/11 novels, but the strange risings of the unrepresentable, difficult for the afflicted fully to express yet impossible for them

to fully repress, either. Just as it is in psychoanalysis that what remains outside the ego is of most revealing import—all those details that cannot be recalled or which stubbornly refuse to discard their masquerade—so too it follows in *The Zero* that all the vanished memories and forbidden ideas provide the source of Remy’s tension and pain, and leave their vestigial traces on his conversation, obsessions, and acts. These “compromise formations,” as Freud called them, could include Remy’s constant shifting references to “gaps,” “dust,” “ghosts,” and “the missing” (Freud 1909/2010). But what blame, aggression, sorrow, guilt, and longings for suicide brood beneath the textual shell to these references are never pierced by his analyst, Dr. Rieux. The analytic sessions will not effect a cure nor even seem to begin to do so, because Remy’s closed-off moments and struggles are never acknowledged: “‘Gaps,’ says Dr. Rieux [to Remy], ‘what gaps?’... [and] he reached for the prescription sheet” (Walter 2006, 196). The ever-increasing medication prescriptions and steady ignoring of his visions only fuel Remy’s fear that everyone—from Osama bin Laden to Dr. Rieux—is trying to hurt him.

To varying degrees, all 9/11 novels with a New Yorker protagonist struggle with survivor guilt—the awful and unanswerable question of why the protagonist lives and all these other innocent people beside him or her perish. Shame, blame, or guilt converts to taking the nature and identity of the dead, as in the case reports of psychologists investigating trauma detailed from the 1942 Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire in Boston (America’s worst club blaze), wherein survivors became living ghosts by taking on the personalities, dress, hobbies, and even careers of some of the 492 deceased. Ghosts, as Derrida forcefully argues, always bear “the right of manifestation of a certain truth” (Derrida 1995, 49), and this truth in *The Zero* is as dark as a Gothic crime, a scandal put away. Not only do these ghosts imply that they have not been fully mourned, but they suggest that an end to mourning is itself a myth or that emotional closure over the mass murder of loved ones will always be fraudulent. Moreover, the possession ghosts that direct the thoughts and actions of the living seem again and again to mouth one truth: a desire for vengeance against the attackers. The fact that the 9/11 hijackers are dead poses an acute problem. Who does a surviving terrorist-victim properly retaliate against if the attackers died themselves along with the innocents? This is a conflict implied but

never adequately solved in any of the investigated novels. None of the survivors say they gain anything from America attacking an Iraq that had no part in the WTC's fall. This futility points to perhaps the most threatening truth, profoundly articulated by Derrida, that the United States routinely executes state terrorism and its declaration of a "War on Terror" as a de facto autoimmunity war on itself by itself. The "lost characters" in 9/11 fiction, as Chloé Tazartez forcefully argues in "Terrorist or Victim?", begin in readers a "questioning of the usual conceptions" of obsession and violence, and the quickly reversing, never settling nature of victimhood. Enlarging this thesis, these novels show us clearly how the victims of terror may be doubly or triply victimized, the second time by their own government and a third time by themselves. In such a process, victims become victimizers.

Derrida's formulation on victimhood is worth adding to because *The Zero* seems in conversation with it. Derrida's meditation during a New York interview just "steps away from the ruins," as he puts it, removes the boundary between "victim" and "terrorist." The principal feature of language about terrorism appears to be its reversibility, its lack of fixedness. Derrida potently questions the easy assumptions: "If one is not to trust blindly in the prevailing language, which remains most often subservient to the rhetoric of the media and to the banter of the political powers, we must be very careful using the term 'terrorism' and especially 'international terrorism.' In the first place, what is terror? What distinguishes it?" (Derrida 2003). Complicating our response to 9/11, without taking away from our sense of its bottomless tragedy, Derrida alleges that it becomes hard to differentiate between a "terror that is organized, provoked, and instrumentalized," like Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, and a U.S. Department of Defense retaliatory killing. This claim gains credence when we consider that both Al Qaeda attacks and American armed responses are designed with the goal of changing another's policy or removing its presence in a region. Indeed, when the United States dropped bombs and fired drones against sovereign states near the time President Obama would win the Nobel Peace Prize, some U.S. allies still declared the killing as part of a Just War. Yet such attacks kill foreign civilians frequently, as reported on

the front pages of newspapers around the world.⁷ Approval from sites of international diplomacy for the American strikes could make little difference to remaining survivors who lost homes and their families. They are the constant victims of the euphemism “collateral damage,” whose faces or names may not be widely known and whose continuing trauma has not stopped drone attacks. This disturbing similarity of terrorist violence and American military actions is what Remy tries to reconcile himself to, thinking aloud: “Maybe this is what it feels like to be a soldier. That you just move forward because if you stop to think about the context, what it all means, you’ll just go crazy” (Walter 2006, 167). Remy’s meditation captures the FBI, CIA, and ORL characters’ mentality to continue with a mission no matter how strategically misguided, morally debased, possibly prosecutable, or ultimately suicidal.

The confusion, ethical fog, and survivor guilt, along with the corrosive shame and sense of injustice within what I term “avenger guilt,” darkly blooms in Remy, and murder is the result. Cynthia Weber’s largest post-9/11 query is useful now: “The foundational question of U.S.-ness [after the WTC fall] is what does it mean to be a moral America?” (Weber 2005, 2). Weber and other public intellectuals (Georgiana Banita, Noam Chomsky, Žižek, Baudrillard, Versluys, Gray, Butler, Punter, and Derrida) dwell on the crimes of the United States visited upon many innocent people in Afghanistan and Iraq, and ask how much longer Americans can still hold the mantle of innocent victimhood post-9/11. More importantly, they ask if there is any sympathy for all the new and often blameless victims of the War on Terror beyond America’s shores. They are interested in why “patriotic euphoria” (Banita 2012, 3) occurs rather than a greater, empathetic “consciousness or recognition” (Banita 2012, 5) growing for the millions of sufferers and displaced persons. Why have Americans failed to resist entering and refueling a cycle of violence? These complicated ethical questions apply to Remy, and the unsatisfactory answer from him is often

⁷Based at City University London since 2010, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that since 2002, USAF drone strikes have killed between 91 and 181 civilians in Yemen. Since 2004, similar strikes have felled 424–966 non-combatants in Pakistan, and between 3 and 10 civilians have died from them in Somalia since 2007. Between 2015 and September 11, 2016, approximately 75–130 non-enemies have perished by U.S. drones in Afghanistan. Twenty-one of the dead were children (“Get the Data: Drone Wars” 2016). The estimates are pooled from these and other sources: *The Independent*, the *Financial Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Times*, *Le Monde*, *Mediapart*, *The Guardian*, and *The Observer*.

silence, accompanied by his traumatic “amnesia.” As Banita understands it, Remy’s “dreamy condition, which prohibits emotional connections with others because he cannot remember them from one moment to the next, dramatize[s] a more generalized post-9/11 amnesia and disaffection, ... [Americans] nursing their grief in solitude” (Banita 2012, 6). This unrelieved “grief in solitude,” in opposition to the communal anguish that comes to many New Yorkers in real life just after the 9/11 devastation and leads them to help each other in their days and weeks of need, may help to explain Remy’s detachment from others. Asked to spy upon, torture, and kill those who seem at first to be Al Qaeda suspects—but later are revealed as informants for American bureaucracies—Remy cannot leave his own labyrinth of solitude to help or defend them.

Despite the many competing motives and multiple parties behind *The Zero*’s state terrorism, its hydra-headed appearance of threat can also express itself in one character. Remy clearly evokes the state’s behavior in its violent action and forgetfulness, or what novelist and war critic Gore Vidal termed in a documentary film, *The United States of Amnesia* (Wrathall 2003). Disconcertedly like U.S. defense and intelligence agencies the book raises, Remy’s bloody crimes and killing of civilians are (1) barely recognized by himself, (2) excused and rationalized, and then (3) unremembered later by the others who torture. The whole of the novel represents a surface where people easily slide from one identity to another: from terror suspect to terror victim and back again. What makes this a perfect environment for such identity slippage are the constant gaps in the narrative. In “Digital Fatigue,” Garrett Stewart rightfully observes that “the real problem” of depicting the War on Terror is “that it’s too shapeless for plot” (Stewart 2009, 45). But we can add to that diagnosis that these shapeless ambiguities grow into sublimity, into a matrix of gaps and lacunae where tortures occur, Black Ops fester, extraordinary rendition spreads⁸ to secret U.S. detention sites abroad, and extralegal limbo lands burgeon. In such places, neither declared charges, nor habeas corpus, nor scheduled trials exist, effectively skirting public attention and due process.

⁸When CIA agents speak of the American directed abduction and transfer of terrorism suspects abroad to select detention and interrogation facilities, they are often direct and bluntly practical. The country that American operatives send a person of interest often suggests his or her fate. According to CIA operative Robert Baer: “If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear—never to see them again—you send them to Egypt” (qtd. in ACLU 2022).

Tending to shapelessness, indeterminate in its scene and chapter endings, opaque in its speech, and unstable in its characters—one moment characters are “real” and the next phantomized or gone for good—*The Zero* is a kind of fictive uranium. For instance, Remy is a victim of the 9/11 tragedy, rushing into the North Tower and experiencing the inexpressible. But neither Remy nor anyone else in the novel is able to explain or depict what happens to him during 15 minutes in the attacked North Tower or for the remaining 12 hours of his day as he wanders. Readers are left to only guess where he next goes, what he does, and what he sees. Identification with victimhood demands a story and not just a missing slot on a time log. All we are told from his policing partner, though, with only 6 percent of the novel remaining, is that “‘I thought for sure we’d lost you, until I saw you that night.’ Remy searched his memory, but there was nothing” (Walter 2006, 283). This lost day is an extreme gap, which along with the constant jump cuts of action in the novel separates *The Zero* from all the other fictions surveyed here. Remy ponders for hundreds of pages, “[Wasn’t] I just here? Didn’t I just hear this conversation? Were the gaps moving ... Backward now?” (Walter 2006, 27). As vocalized by Remy’s cruise-car partner Paul Guterak, our doubts on Remy’s location and activities become overwhelming, and never receive answer: “How come you never talk about it? Every other cop I know talks about it, even if they weren’t there. But you... you never talk about it” (Walter 2006, 283). Remy’s constant line of “I don’t really remember” is not a straightforward one, though. He in fact does remember what seems like “billions of papers” falling from the towers, and he recalls hearing loud splats that he cannot identify. From the perspectives of all the earlier 9/11 novels, those splats would seem to be the sound of jumpers in fatal contact with the concrete plaza alongside Remy.

Visions, sometimes noted by *The Zero*’s characters as “hallucinations” and at other times “fever dreams,” often arise following gaps in the narrative, like the one that follows the fall of the jumpers, and they have their own mysteries to be interpreted. Frequently recurring in the novel, the word “gaps” grows in power and Kafkaesque enigma in *The Zero*, but no one in the novel provides resolution for what happens during them. The novel’s sole therapist, rather than beginning a course of psychotherapy for Remy, only looks on in an utterly uninvolved and disbelieving way and reaches for yet another prescription sheet for his client.

What should interest us even more is that Remy’s psychiatrist labels the key informant Jaguar a “hallucination,” that same informant who becomes

a train station suicide bomber at novel's end, who kills Remy's substitute-lover April Selios (or possibly kills her in the hallucination). On the one hand, this is suggestive of the trouble readers have had understanding fictional terrorists from as early on as the bomber of the Greenwich Observatory, Adolf Verloc, in Conrad's *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907). As Punter concludes from his meditation on *The Secret Agent* and other terrorism texts: "In encountering the terrorist, we are taken to the limit of understanding, to the end of inscription: nothing but death is written on this body, and death is not interpretable, it is the liminal case which simultaneously forbids all thought of the threshold" (Punter 2008, 202). Moreover, the problem of understanding and interpreting Jaguar is not merely that he suggests death or that he is a changeable, oscillating figure (from U.S. agent to U.S. attacker), but that he too much resembles those that hunt him. He fulfills Punter's insight that Terror is reflection: "mirroring in its purest form" (Punter 2008, 203). Moreover, Jaguar's later suicide bombing (mirroring the folly of retribution by U.S. agencies in *The Zero*) signals the moment when, in this incisive definition of terrorism, "all thought appears to have failed and only 'direct action' ... appears to suffice" (Punter 2008, 203). Remy eventually becomes a twin to the one who had been his polar opposite, making it impossible, in a Derridean sense, to tell who is a terrorist and who an innocent victim. Jaguar (in a supposed terror ring, wholly manufactured by the ORL in order to exaggerate New York's continued Code Orange attack-risk and funnel more federal funds their way) is a victim, too, as we recall that he lost an apparently innocent relative in the Iraq War. A mirroring relationship soon establishes between ORL investigator and his terrorist-quarry in the book, between Remy's Dr. Jekyll and Jaguar's Mr. Hyde. Chloé Tazartez apprehends the mirroring well: "They are alone, they act against their convictions, they do not exist for most people and they do not succeed in expressing what they want to communicate. They doubt a lot about what is their part in society and seem often desperate, unable to catch the world, to represent it and understand it which forces them into paralysis" (Tazartez 2011). If Jaguar is a hallucination-invention of Remy himself, as Tazartez maintains, and a dream within the larger dream that this novel seems to be, then Jaguar is also invested with all the darkness that Remy cannot vocalize, but which he has some inkling that he himself possesses. Thus, Remy is not only possessed by the dead, but ethically paralyzed during the "gaps" by the living.

If we study the gaps through the lens of psychoanalysis, we may be reminded of Nicolas Abraham's influential essay, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology." One of Abraham's compelling ideas is that "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others ... The burial of an unspeakable fact within the *loved one*" (Abraham 1987, 287–288). Let us apply this idea to Remy's romantic involvements and fantasies. Beautiful, charismatic March Selios—suspected conspirator and eventually cleared victim in *The Zero*—has a face that Remy long lingers over. She possesses a buried fact for much of the narrative, namely whether she worked with an Al Qaeda terrorist known only as Bishir Madain or not. A close reading indicates that Remy goes about his detective work in the most roundabout way. He is keenly interested in her sexual life and asks her associates, neighbors, and parents about her sexual liaisons under the moral shield of investigation. Technically, the discovery of her sexual partners may either link her closer or much farther away from what the other investigators in *The Zero* first announce a terroristic "inside job" on 9/11 that she was part of. But the frequency and variations in her love acts may have little bearing on the investigation. Yet Remy is deeply interested in her sexual world anyway. April Selios (March's younger sister) becomes, in his mind, an acceptable version for a woman he longs for, the suspect who holds the secret that would close his investigation or potentially open more perplexities on the terrorism.

From the first pages, Remy lives three roles: the amnesiac, the suicide, and the lover. He wants to discover *where* he is going the whole time, *who* he is unofficially working for, and ultimately *what* March's involvement in 9/11 is. A compulsion to end his constant confusion through self-destruction also betrays him. His attempted suicide will not be one of total dismemberment through explosion in some uncanny identification with many of the 9/11 murdered whose remains he searches for, at "The Hole" by day and in dreams at night. But it is at least an attempted partial disintegration. He aims a pistol at his head and fires. Psychoanalytic theorizations of the Gothic commonly probe such violent tropes. Ideas taken from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* imply that trauma victims rehearse death (through nightmare, flashbacks to pain, and abuse of substances) as a way to, as Roger Luckhurst elegantly sums it, "master and contain painful psychic disturbances by returning to a beatific state without stimulus—death. Life, in essence, [reveals itself as only] a lengthy diversion between states of deathly quiescence" (Luckhurst 2013, 526). In *The Zero*, the

longing for “deathly quiescence” counterbalances with the impulse to answer mystery (from the content of the gaps, to the reasons for the attack, the extent of March Selios’s involvement in terror, and the basis of Remy’s attraction to her). The novel may begin with Remy’s closed eyes and the seeking of death from the barrel of a gun, yet it ends with the protagonist shutting his eyes and seeking love, specifically the hand of March’s sister.

Besides a complicated intersection of drives in Remy, there are opposing drives in him. He could seem largely a victim of terrorism, yet by other criteria he may appear mostly as an agent of institutionalized state terror. As Walter Benjamin memorably put it (himself purportedly a victim of state terror by one theory):⁹ “In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective” (Benjamin 1997, 40). As such detectives, we see, on the one side, that Remy loses comrades in the WTC and suffers grave trauma from his entry into the burning towers. On the other side, his acts as terrorist-hunter include spying, informant-cultivation, arresting, fraud, cover-up, interrogating, torturing, and sometimes killing people who are only suspects. The Janus-faced nature of Remy causes a problem in both reader identification and understanding. Perhaps Walter even downplays this character’s complexity in his own critique of the novel, suggested by a *Playboy* interview where Walter remembers that “There was a real conflation of hero and victim in the wake of 9/11, in our perverse desire to create a triumphant myth out of pure tragedy.... [Remy] is a helpless man of the very best intentions” (Walter 2006, 2007 *Playboy*). A fuller interpretation of Remy is that he is “hero and victim,” but also a villain. Following D. H. Lawrence’s famous injunction to trust the tale and not the teller, we heed the fresh blood observable again and again staining Remy’s shoes. It is not blood of his veins. The memory gaps that he reports increase in number as he intensifies the interrogations of suspects. Though we do not see the full interrogations, the confirmed presence of Remy there may assist accounting for the blood. If he is the torturer beating someone, an

⁹ Both Edward Rothstein in *The New York Times* and Stuart Jeffries in *The Guardian* from July 2001 give Stephen Schwartz’s theory from “The Mysterious Death of Walter Benjamin” serious consideration. The belief is that agents of Stalin in Portbou, Spain, in 1940, murdered Benjamin, who had just completed a devastating critique of Marxism (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*)—contrary to the long-held idea he was victim of a self-administered morphine overdose. Schwartz further argues that Benjamin’s being on a Stalinist “kill list” would finally explain why his supposed “suicide note” appears in a language that Benjamin typically did not write in French (Schwartz 2001).

accomplice to a beating, or else a witness far too jaded to bring an end to the bludgeoning, or at least to report it. This uneasiness over what our protagonist's nature is has the promise perhaps more than any of the works surveyed here to hold readers accountable over what they may be uneasily quiet about. American and Allied readers may ask if they are accomplices to state terrorism themselves through their tax dollars, voting records, and lack of protest over torture, extra-judicial detention, and institutionalized murder. After violations of terror-suspects' rights inside America, extraordinary rendition of American-sought suspects to allies with questionable human rights records (including Poland, Pakistan, and Romania), and the violent excesses from invasions as well as occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, readers may find no easy answer about clear victimhood or culpability. Into this ambiguity, Walter inserts himself: "It's satire about us, about the collective post-traumatic stress that we've suffered and the way we've retreated into a cocoon lined with real-estate listings and 401K updates while truly frightening measures are undertaken on our behalf" (Walter 2006, 2007 *Playboy*). The cocoon is a revealing metaphor to use for Remy as the ORL protects him and entombs others (in particular, those ghost detainees who are officially not logged when taken into holding facilities, tortured, and never seen alive again). The cocoon is what the rest of America retreats to after the first-strike bombings done in its name and under the rationale of a Just War: the pre-emptive strike seen as a necessary protection of the Homeland from perceived enemies at home or abroad. If art should make readers question the use and abuse of power, then terror is the agent that makes room for the questions. Foucault has a productive insight that applies well to the novel: "By the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, ... A breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself" (Foucault 1965, 288). Terrorism is the madness that disrupts this text more than anything else, even more than the supposed hallucinations. The uncomfortable "question without answer" possibly becomes, in this case, what political and military interventions were perpetrated elsewhere for decades against the Islamic Other prompting terrorism and blowback now, and what will be disproportionate destruction and killing meted out by America and allies to retaliate for it? To borrow a title and concept from Joe Haldeman's 1974 novel of the same name, this becomes the *new* Forever War.

What Derrida raises in this regard is of great bearing in this novel: who gets to decide what violence is warranted and what is senseless, which

violence has widely approved status, which power better “legalize[s] it on the world stage” (Derrida 2003)? In a possible reference to Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Derrida reflects: “Benjamin speaks of how the state tends to appropriate for itself, and precisely through threat, a monopoly on violence” (Derrida 2003). The greatest questioner of the state monopoly on approved killing and upheaval in this novel’s key debates is the Muslim Other, the informant. When the amnesiac Remy asks Jaguar if “you work for us?”, the informant’s reply is “Us? I’m sorry, but your idea of us tends to be a little bit fluid, my friend. Either you’re with us or ... What? You switch sides indiscriminately, ... Arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns” (Walter 2006, 291). The mocking reference to President Bush’s State of the Union vow that, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” is a clear one (Bush 2001). But besides functioning to reveal Remy’s memory dysfunction and mental sluggishness once more, this conversation concentrates the conundrum perfectly: Jaguar is thought to be an enemy to America, but then why does the United States constantly supply and employ him? Interestingly, Derrida’s autoimmunity concept applied to the acts of the state here supplies a beginning answer. We remember that political autoimmunity is that disease wherein all the strength of the state attacks itself (its healthy “tissues”) through agents of terror that it secretly hires (or that its allies hire, as with the case of educated, yet disaffected young men turned fundamentalist terrorists from Egypt and Saudi Arabia). The United States, thus, either pays, offers refuge to, or long tolerates those who will try to explode its political, military, and economic systems and hegemony. With a black humor that masks the gravity of their conversation, Jaguar ponders who are the innocent people anymore. What lies beneath that question is more vexing one—who decides who the innocent people are?

Remy squeezed his good eye shut. “Are you ...” He couldn’t find the words.
 “... Trying to hurt people?”
 “Which people?”
 “Innocent people,” Remy gritted.
 The man laughed. “That doesn’t exactly narrow it down.” (Walter 2006, 291)

Significantly, Remy can never give answer to these questions of guilt and of identity. Their exchange also shows what might at first seem an extended objection over a minor point: Jaguar bristles at being over-coded with

several secret double-agent names. However, his complaint here is also directed against the power of the state agencies to erase his actual first and last name (which they do know but refuse to use) and recharacterize him at will with whatever name of an Islamic Other fits their ideology at the moment. These names function very economically as aggressive wit, in the way Freud illustrates in his *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*.¹⁰ For example, the first name “Jaguar” immediately evokes animalistic force, furtiveness, cunning, and resourcefulness, and the second signifies emotionlessness: “Ice-Man.” Both names concisely disclose much of his American handlers’ prejudices to their Muslim contacts. Chloé Tazartez adds to the conception of Jaguar as the Other: “He does not eat, work or sleep. He appears only in scenes where he is alone with Remy and is talking to him about broad matters as American society, trauma or violence. He is mainly built by the discourse of other characters (especially Remy’s) which present him as the official creator of the terrorist cell” (Tazartez 2011, 6).

Despite the reduction of Jaguar to someone no one listens to, he still begins to successfully disassemble the construct of “terrorist” whilst on the phone. There are no absolute ways to tell state terror from non-state terror, Jaguar convincingly reasons. He does not argue this through appeals to Islamic religious beliefs, but through logic. Remy and Jaguar, then, are each carrying in them the Other: “They are [both] alone, they act against their convictions, they do not exist for most people and they ... are trapped in collective images which do not correspond to them” (Tazartez 2011, 6). If the doubting Jaguar is the hidden side of desperate Remy, and the evidence Tazartez offers suggests he is, then Remy supports even more fully Derrida’s contention of the autoimmunity process within not only states but also individual beings. The enemy cannot be escaped because, as Derrida claims, the Other is also “in oneself” (Derrida 2003).

If we begin to question the invisible borders said to separate a non-state movement’s violence from state terror, then we will remove its exclusiveness and discrete identity. Boundaries are as much about identity as they are about exclusion, as Derrida explored in pre-9/11 works. Raising and examining at length relevant FBI and CIA definitions of terrorism post

¹⁰I explore this mechanism of humiliation-via-renaming in fictions that depict state-run terror of the twentieth century, as well. I use Freud’s *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud 1905/1962) to interpret Lawrence Durrell’s five novels of WWII Nazi-occupation trauma, *The Avignon Quintet* (Olson 1993, 93, 97, 99), where the protagonist brilliantly renames his Third Reich enemies.

9/11, along with U.S. federal laws on this terrorism, Derrida concludes that the U.S. government agencies reason terrorism to be violence for “a political end (to influence or change the politics of a country by terrorizing its civilian population) ... [which does] not therefore exclude ‘state terrorism’” (Derrida 2003). Thus, U.S. law-making and law-enforcing bodies, driven by “a political end” themselves, would not be able to find exculpatory language or evidence (from the charges of “Western Terrorism”) for their own attacks by official military and Black Ops on foreign populations. And Jaguar could be seen as the most wronged, for, as Derrida intuits, “Every terrorist in the world claims to be responding in self-defense to a prior terrorism on the part of the state, one that simply went by other names and covered itself with all sorts of more or less credible justifications” (Derrida 2003). Jaguar leaves the debate by blowing himself up at a New York City railway terminal, but it is Remy who keeps falling into ethical and logical traps that, along with his compromised memory, he has no escape from. These aporias and gaps do not give Remy enough pause, though, and do not stop him from committing more violence. However, the ethical exercise may make the reader question his or her own culpability in encouraging or at least tolerating state terror and to erode our unquestioning belief in simplistic, reductive categories of us/them, with us/against us, innocent/guilty, and victim/terrorist.

TORTURE

Despite his traumatized confusion and dissociative fog, Remy inexplicably operates as an *inquisitor extraordinaire*. This would seem a potential weakness in the narrative, for victims would plausibly be less afraid of a torturer who seems disjointed temporally, physically, and logically. One way around the contradiction is that Remy’s cohorts always praise his intelligence-gathering in earshot of the detained, perhaps causing *greater* distress and apprehension in the detainees as the seemingly benighted Remy approaches them. Words become reality, and even Remy’s most muddled and circuitous questioning takes on the shades of the most diabolic game. After U.S. officials grow bored and then dissatisfied with the terror-data retrieved from their usual methods of information-extraction—merely tying suspects’ hands behind backs and hanging them from bars before dousing their scars with sea water—they ask for Remy’s supposed superior techniques. Remy then plays a cruelly effective confidence game on one suspect. Smuggling a tortured detainee named Assan out of the empty

hold of a ship and into international waters bound for Miami and freedom, Remy gains trust and extracts possibly vital intelligence from him during the passage that the others never came near to obtaining. But afterward, the getaway boat turns around, and the suspect finds himself not rescued or released, but simply returned to the empty hold of the waiting ship of ceaseless tortures. Not insignificantly, the name “Remy” derives from the Latin “Remigius,” meaning “oarsman,” and indeed Remy does take people onto the water, making sea-crossings toward a dark destiny, onto a further shore, or into deeper ambiguities—first saving then dooming them. His ferries them as an oblivious Charon. As Remy’s partner Markham remarks as the dispirited detainee slumps back into the hold of the torture ship after what seemed an escape: “So Assan *was* holding out on us. I was dubious, but damn if that didn’t go just like you said it would” (Walter 2006, 140). Once more, though, Remy will have no memory of practicing any masterfully duplicitous interrogation strategy. He seems dumbfounded as agents pull Assan back into the hold and to an unknown fate. Later in the novel and back in New York City, we may infer that Markham attempts to validate the idea that it does not really matter which Arab is apprehended in New York City (including Assan) and who will die in torture, in a U.S. federally controlled ship or anywhere else, whether unknowing of terrorist cells or complicit in them, because no one keeps any record of the arrest and the government has endless attorneys to stymie any search for information by relatives. Soon enough, far away from New York City in Baghdad 2003, a U.S. military police officer stationed at Abu Ghraib will describe a depressingly similar scenario to documentarian Errol Morris: “We’d sweep up every fighting age male on the streets and get them locked up—taxi cab drivers, welders, bakers, and if we couldn’t find their parents, we’d take the children of suspected terrorists [male and female, some sixteen years of age].... We we’re trying to get them to talk... That’s all” (*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008).

We can judge by Markham’s behavior and comments that what matters to him is solely supporting the American power structures and continuing the federal revenue stream to the New York City anti-terror organization. All this promises well-paid employment for the rest of his life, as major U.S. government officials in the novel announce there can be no end to the Global War on Terror. But Remy’s and Jaguar’s behaviors and words illustrate another process: the possibility of being a victim and a terrorist at the same time, depending on who talks about them.

Followed not only in the media but also represented in poetry and fiction, in TV and film, as well as in the “ethical” turn in trauma studies in the mid-2000s were U.S. Presidential, Justice Department, and Congressional approvals and defenses of torture methods during almost all of the Bush Administration (from 2001 to 2008). The event that seared the practice of U.S.-administered torture into American and world consciousness was the leaking of photos of violations of suspects held at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison (in Arabic, “the place of the raven” or alternately, “the father of the raven”). Photos of what investigating American General Taguba called “every kind of obscenity” (*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008) appeared committed by American soldiers (largely military police) and government agencies (mostly CIA) abusing detainees, many of whom had not yet been charged yet with a crime but were caught in random sweeps and held until processing could begin. The embrace of “enhanced interrogation” by the Bush Administration would be shunned and officially end under President Obama, but some organizations suggest institutionalized-torture continued until 2011 or three years into President Obama’s first term (sources including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, *The Atlantic*, and Reuters). Torture’s resurfacing as an acceptable method for information gathering during the 2015–2016 Republican primaries marked the immanent return of this repressed tool in intelligence and military circles. Indeed, in one of the earliest 2015 Presidential primary debates, Republican candidates competed for who would be most willing to defend the violence practice, with future President Donald Trump portentously vowing: “I’d bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding” (qtd. in McCarthy 2016).

How to assess torture and formulate a theory on the practice of torture in *The Zero*, becomes more complex when Remy and his team apparently obtain a believable confession of a terror plan against North America or Europe and the naming of a wider net of conspirators, all of which is life-saving information. Readers may move from being passive spectators of the state’s manipulation, humiliation, and violent interrogation to complicit spectators or even, vicariously, the torturer himself, if the violence appears to achieve “results.” Later, when we find the torture was largely useless for uncovering contacts and infiltrating their cells, our emotional trek seems well defined by Roger Luckhurst’s tracing of torture in contemporary film and television: “Dramatic scenarios seem sometimes to justify torture, but just as often suggest a rueful critique of the idiocy of

thinking violence could provide any form or resolution” (Luckhurst 2010, 16). The continued and knowing use of torture when faulty intelligence and confessions of guilt come from it (that cannot even be admissible in a U.S. court if taken under duress) seems a paradox. A re-examination of the novel shows the use of torture stems largely from xenophobia, a desire for revenge, frustration and feelings of impotence, and a failure of imagination to extract information by any other means.

Torture, of course, rises in Gothic fiction from its genesis novel *Castle of Otranto* forward (including *The Monk*, *The Italian*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and others). The torture specifically used in 9/11 novels shares an element with Gothic fiction in the desire to cause fear in the victims and dread for others in the victims’ circle, gain utter control over someone, attempt revenge, extract some confession, and to satisfy the torturer’s sexual gratification and sadism. In these terrorism novels, though, U.S. and Allied torture attempts to penetrate the network of Jihadist cells, which by their design typically occlude discovery by each member knowing little to nothing of most of the other members. Hence, the torture in the 9/11 novels, unless a suspected terrorist lieutenant is caught with high-level data, often goes on for days with no hope of helpful intelligence to harvest. Among books surveyed in this book, we do not enter the consciousness of a tortured, so-called radical Muslim terrorist. We only enter the point of view from those who torture him. And through ghostly contacts after the killing of a detainee, much more of the affect and trauma releases from the perpetrator.

The torturing seems to continue Derrida’s argument about the disabling autoimmunity attacks in a state. We could argue, for instance, that every act of torture in the novels helps to defeat the state, no matter what useful information comes from the organized cruelties of *The Zero*, which include strappado hanging, smashing heads into walls, freezing of naked suspects, and the splashing of sea water into their cut faces. Beyond the horrors done to the helpless victims and their communities, threats of “Homeland terror” in the United States increase as state torture scandals become a recruiting tool for armed Islamic fundamentalism among American citizens. Then there are risks to Allied soldiers in the Afghan and Iraqi fields of battle from reprisal attacks sparked by leaks of American mistreatment of detainees. As a comparison, after the tortures, rapes, killings, and every imaginable indecency from U.S. military police and secret

agencies within Abu Ghraib's¹¹ Tier Block 1-A made headlines in world media around late 2003, terrorist recruitment soared. Stanley McCrystal, one of the highest ranking generals to serve in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, would admit in his memoir that: "In my experience, we found that nearly every first-time jihadist claimed Abu Ghraib [abuses] had first jolted him into action" (McCrystal 2013, 172). In *The Zero*, Remy jolts into greater acts of self-destruction with the ghostly return of the detainees that he tortured, broke, or even slew.

Sexual torture does not play a significant role in *The Zero*, though sexual commands, threats, and humiliations did exert a major role at Abu Ghraib. Sexual degradation *does* strongly figure in a novel that *The Zero* draws favorable comparisons to, however: Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006). In New York City native Kalfus's narrative, a lawyer who escapes one of the WTC towers on 9/11 finds himself afterward soon divorced and in despair. Seeking other women as comfort in a period of frenzied terror-sex, protagonist Marshall ends up at a party with his children's preschool teacher, Miss Naomi. What he does not realize is that the party is a thinly disguised re-enactment of the sexual tortures of Abu Ghraib, wherein at a New York apartment, a former Marine/current penitentiary employee named only Nick orders male prostitutes to assume positions akin to the infamous "crucifixion" photo of a hooded detainee standing on a box whilst hooked to electrical wires. The next command seems too close to Abu Ghraib violations to be accidental. Nick orders a hooded prostitute, a boy of only "fourteen or fifteen" years, to masturbate while women revelers—including the innocent-seeming Miss Naomi—are ordered to urge him on with their lips. Marshall protests, "Nick, she doesn't want to," and earns a look of intense irritation, even disgust from Miss Naomi (Kalfus 2006, 216). All the above seems to reconfigure the infamous photos of naked, black-hooded, exhausted and standing prisoners, who were ordered by military police officer Charles Grainer at Abu Ghraib to masturbate before female officers Megan Graner (née Ambuhl), Sabrina Harman, Lynndie England. The American penalty for stopping the masturbation, in the Iraqi detainees' minds, was a fatal beating or a shooting. Some terrified detainees continued masturbating for over 45 minutes. Thus, in *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, the Homeland

¹¹ Its legacy as a house of ghosts is a long one, as well. Before the American occupation, Saddam Hussein ordered executions of 30,000 suspects at Abu Ghraib (*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008).

seems as corrupted and sexually demeaned as Iraq's most notorious prison. A conjoining of sexual sadism and threat of death was the foreboding atmosphere of Abu Ghraib, as it is in Kalfus's novel. While Kalfus's victim is not an Arab, the humiliating script takes its cues from the Abu Ghraib scandal. Moreover, in both cases, light-skinned, blonde clothed women are mocking dark-skinned brown-haired nude men, hypocritically insinuating there is something animalistic about the males: "More hoots and ribald remarks were directed at the kid: ... Mock praise for his hardness, mock wonder that he hadn't already ejaculated, disdain for the size of his hard-on. Miss Naomi laughed too, her eyes searching for Nick's sunglasses. She found them and pointed to the boy's cock with both hands. She said, 'Mission accomplished!'" (Kalfus 2006). All these degrading actions and remarks echo the reality of Abu Ghraib where in a photo Private First Class Lynndie England is "smoking a cigarette and pointing [along with giving a 'mission accomplished' thumbs up sign] to a prisoner who was being forced to fondle his own genitals with a bag over his head" (*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008). Some of the prisoners afterward in testimony would share how traumatized they were, giving a glimpse into the darkest pain. One of the naked suspects forced to fondle himself non-stop was Saddam Salah al-Rawi. He remembers in his cell afterward shouting: "Please come and take me. Please kill me. I am Osama bin Laden, I was in the plane that hit the World Trade Center.' ... I wanted to be dead 1,000 times" (qtd. in McCarthy 2004). Soon enough, after witnessing this humiliation in the novel, Marshall wishes to be dead as well. Though not a radicalized Muslim, he nevertheless straps on a suicide vest and tries to explode it, not long after sending what appears to be letters with anthrax to the FBI. While *The Zero* has no women in its torture facilities, its interrogators still ask the detainees questions about women, especially about their sexual knowledge of March Selios. Some of the answers make Remy distraught.

We note that Remy's gin consumption in the novel increases as the torture sessions intensify, up to the degree that he brings in varieties of gin to the torture chambers—and later, *any* alcohol—during meetings and questionings of both suspects and informants. One of his most telling alcoholic shudders during interrogations involves blood. Human blood trickling across foreheads, spilling down necks, bursting in the eyes, and splashing on clothes are constants in *The Zero*, but perhaps the most revealing moment of blood's appearance involves none of those. After one interrogation, Remy mutters to no one in particular: "I do these things that

make no sense, and people get hurt. I come home with blood on my shoes" (Walter 2006, 224). Indeed, there are four times in the novel where the image of human blood—not his own—on Remy's shoes float towards him. The linkage of nightmare, guilt, trauma, and the ghosts of the past tie to blood on the shoes with frightful economy. Like the Macbethian trope, this blood will not rub out either, and its presence is the consistent indicator of those moments when Remy will become more frantic, disturbed, and distraught. The blood has no other ostensible source than the blood splatter from his torture victims under blows. Not all ghosts who come back are clearly seen, and Remy's dead-detainee Assan's return is of course a subtler one than the disembodied head of Mohamed Atta "bursting with righteousness" that haunts in Shirley Abbot's 9/11 novel *The Future of Love* (Abbott 2008, 301), but it is still an effective one. Assan and the trauma of killing him returns to Remy when he sees human blood trickling toward him. Beyond a nod to the folklore custom of blood flow from a cadaver signaling the murderer's entrance,¹² Walter exploits blood to fill in these frequently mentioned "gaps" that are often fatal to somebody. Remy is in the room with a bomb suspect, later the suspect is dead, and Remy cannot remember what happened in the interval—the appearance of blood then becomes a way to count the tortured and killed. The blood cries out for justice, and the blood declares Assan's innocence. Blood is the silent way that the unsayable traumata speaks. Following Derrida's notion, it now becomes impossible to tell who is the greater terrorist, the state one or the non-state ones. The fatally tortured inmates transform into the ghosts to be, and the torturers become they whom the phantomized Other haunts. Like the unforeseen sweeps of suspects by the CIA, FBI, and ORL, phantoms arrive at unforeseeable moments that only enflame Remy's PTSD.

Walter's fellow writer of 9/11 Don DeLillo warns, "Never underestimate the power of the state to act out its own massive fantasies" (DeLillo 2001). In *The Zero*, we see the greatest two fantasies of the state operating: the blind insistence that people interrogated are guilty (when evidence continues to suggest that they are not) and that the suspects have

¹²We recall Poe's suggestion of another's guilt of murder, in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, from watching a dead monk bleed as the secret killer approaches. Two hundred years before in *Richard III*, we remember Lady Anne's exclamation that blood would flow from "dead Henry's wounds" when the murderer entered the church.

something to say that can only be cudged out of them. Although it is seldom raised, the question should be asked why the U.S. government officials in fiction or in reality practice or allow torture, if they definitively know it does not reveal valuable intelligence. In fact, a \$40 million dollar, 4-year U.S. Senate-commissioned landmark report of 6000 pages completed in 2012, with 525 of its summary pages declassified for the public in 2014, revealed that torture by the CIA regularly resulted in “fabricated information” from detainees (*The Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program* 2014). My interpretation regarding these “massive fantasies” of the state in *The Zero* is that the anti-terror officials are not gathering enough information otherwise, and there is an impotent rage and revenge seeking directed at suspects over this information deficit through torture. Slavoj Žižek takes this much further in his analysis, arguing that the normalization of torture in American fiction and film (in particular *Zero Dark Thirty*) “is a sign of the moral vacuum we [the world] are gradually approaching” (Žižek 2013). In an earlier piece just following the Abu Ghraib scandal, Žižek makes the provocative claim that the humiliations were less an abhorrent attack on the dignity of the detainees than they were an “initiation into American culture” (Žižek 2004). Thus, Žižek attests, the American stacking of naked Iraqi detainees into crushing pyramids and connecting of electric wires to a black-hooded prisoner (Fig. 2.1) was more akin to Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs and David Lynch’s films than anything else:

Anyone acquainted with the U.S. way of life will have recognised in the photographs the obscene underside of U.S. popular culture. You can find similar photographs in the U.S. press whenever an initiation rite goes wrong in an army unit or on a high school campus and soldiers or students die or get injured in the course of performing a stunt, assuming a humiliating pose or undergoing sexual humiliation. (Žižek 2004)

However, such spectacular claims of systemic cultural barbarism in America should demand impressive evidence, rather than anecdotal pieces, and that evidence may be missing. One could daresay Žižek’s reasoning is sadly congruent with the notorious American talk show host Rush Limbaugh’s claim in the same year that the torture was mere Americana. According to this late AM/FM talk radio personality, whom President Trump would shockingly award a Presidential Medal of Freedom to, in the middle of a



Fig. 2.1 Snapshots of Abu Ghraib complex detainees stripped, tortured, and pyramid piled by U.S. military personnel (taken in November 2003 by prison personnel and coming to public attention by CBS's *60 Minutes* in April 2004 and soon after Amnesty International). The photos stunned the world and led to American backlash and around the world and increased terror attacks according to one U.S. general. By June 2004, new sources revealed that the Bush Administration had not only known of the tortures but had surreptitiously developed legal defenses to exempt America from Geneva Conventions prohibitions against such tortures. (Photo: Public domain/Wikimedia Commons as it is a work prepared by an officer or employee of the United States Government as part of that person's official duties under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1, Section 105 of the US Code. Public Domain/U.S. Government photographs hereafter attributed, "PDUSG.")

2020 State of the Union address, such tortures (that resulted in either trauma or death for the individuals) merely resembled a "college fraternity prank" and an "emotional release" (Limbaugh 2004). Oddly echoing Žižek's dubious analogy, in Limbaugh's mind, the torture was largely a harmless imitation of American performance art: "Have you people

noticed who the torturers are? Women! *The babes!* The babes are meting out the torture. [I]t looks just like anything you'd see Madonna or Britney Spears do on stage" (Limbaugh 2004). To argue that this life-threatening and trauma-inducing torture by U.S. military or intelligence personnel (or their allies) inside a faraway, supposedly sovereign country resembles either "prank" gone awry or a Britney Spears Las Vegas act ignores the fact that its perpetrators have as their standard weapons M9 pistols and that detainees died in their presence (Fig. 2.2).

INTERROGATION

"Death," the American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld whined during the Abu Ghraib scandal, "has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war" (qtd. in Cohen 2006). On this point, and this one alone, I must agree with the late secretary. Through fatal tortures in both *The Zero* and in Abu Ghraib prison, we will enter a world of ghosts who echo war's desolation. Certain suspects taken in for interrogations at Abu Ghraib were routinely called "ghost detainees" by officials. The U.S. military police and American OGA (Other Government Agencies) wanted no trace of them for the International Committee of the Red Cross to find (*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008). Unfiled on the official log, their abuse or deaths were "non-deaths," invisible for outside human rights groups to monitor. So, too, certain American investigative employees and torturers were "ghost interrogators," who did not register on entrance logs to avoid later prosecution (Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure* 2008; Staff of *San Francisco Examiner* 2004). Walter takes a similar secretive path with some names hidden to the reader. One code name is worth investigating further, pushed by the CIA for use for on a lead informant that the Office of Liberty and Recovery already named "Jaguar." "Jaguar" should be called "Ice-man," instead, according to the CIA agent in *The Zero* named Dave. This should cause unusual dread in alert readers because "Ice-man" is the same name that the actual CIA gave to Manadel al-Jamadi, brought into Abu Ghraib on November 4, 2003, by U.S. Navy SEALs. Al-Jamadi was under suspicion for exploding a Red Cross facility. For hours, while his head was stuck under a burlap sack soaked in hot sauce, CIA employees interrogated and tortured al-Jamadi. Ironically and obscenely, whilst interrogators were busily yelling at the very still al-Jamadi for answers and asking the military police to hoist him higher, al-Jamadi had already been deceased for one to two hours (Morris, *Standard*



Fig. 2.2 The iconic picture taken by U.S. military personnel at Abu Ghraib. The detainee was warned that he would be electrocuted if he stepped off the box. (Photo: PDUSG)

Operating Procedure 2008). Still not realizing this, at least one member of the military police reports congratulating the detainee on his ability to stay quiet, unwittingly talking to his ghost all along. Upon finally discovering his death and fearful of spawning a riot among Abu Ghraib prisoners who would witness a corpse removal post-torture, another military police official put the dead al-Jamadi on ice packs for a night to give time to birth a

plan. The next day military police lifted al-Jamadi to a stretcher, connected his arm to an IV, and conveyed him from Abu Ghraib. This wished-for code name “Ice-Man,” therefore, and the ominous debate by agencies in *The Zero* about Jaguar resemble the early steps in making Jaguar into a “dead man walking,” just as Assan became a dead man once torturers escorted him back into the hold of an interrogation ship. Thus, torture taken to its grimmest extreme begets ghosts in *The Zero* as (1) the victim is murdered and the body disguised and hidden, but the victim comes back, (2) the ghost forces us to ask distressing and sometimes unknowable questions (not just are they real, but what do they ask or require of me—what does the ghost want?), (3) the spectres rank the witness with their dead. The observer becomes more and more like the ghost in behavior, and (4) the torturer in the novel becomes the tortured, which well may be the case in “real” life from the comments from military torturers years after their activities. Some accounts of actual American torturers plagued by their misdeeds, and visited metaphorically or physically by ghosts in Iraq and Afghanistan and in America afterward, include Eric Fair’s *Consequence: A Memoir* (2016), Douglas Laux and Ralph Pezzullo’s *Left of Boom: How a Young CIA Case Officer Penetrated the Taliban and Al-Qaeda* (2016), Gary S. Winkler’s authorized biography of torturer Lynndie England (with interviews) *Tortured: Abu Ghraib and the Photographs that Shocked the World* (2009), Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian’s *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator’s Dark Journey Through Iraq* (2007), and Bill Russell Edmonds’ *God Is Not Here: A Soldier’s Struggle with Torture, Trauma, and the Moral Injuries of War* (2015). The aforementioned non-fiction is visited by ghosts through sightings, flashbacks, or vivid nightmares. As the dishonorably discharged Private First Class Lynndie England, who gained notoriety by walking an Abu Ghraib detainee on a leash as she smoked a cigarette, puts it years afterward: “You can’t hear somebody screaming their heads off and not dream about it. ... Something triggers it and, *bam!* I’m back there” (qtd. in Jones 2009).

Just as people vanished within the walls of Abu Ghraib, the suspects captured, arrested, detained, tortured, and killed vanish in *The Zero*. They are hidden without ever being officially recorded, entered, logged. They have no trace of processing, confession, exit, or death. The framework Caruth, Felman, van der Kolk, and others provide on trauma and memory suggests that victims and some perpetrators are not only incapable of uttering the whole trauma, but incapable of remembering the whole as it has been encoded into the brain in a far different way (Caruth 1991,

1995, 1996, 2013, 2014). This opposes McNally's model of full memory whose expression depends upon survivors being carefully asked the questions that can actually trigger recollections of terror and pain. The Caruthian model holds well for the interrogator Remy, as never-explained gaps cover vast parts of this novel.

Indeed, *The Zero* must have gaps for Remy to continue to function as a counter-terrorist agent. If he should fully remember and even express intimately and clearly what he has done, then there is the risk that he could not continue to do it. A victim's trauma sometimes enables or abets evil to go on. Remy works as an interrogator because he does not ask Derrida's question early enough, namely: what is the ethical difference between state violence (torture and killing for a declared nation) and that of non-state violence (injuring and killing for a cause, for the downtrodden, for a religious or political movement)? They are both abhorrent and beneath the pale of the civilized. If Remy asks this question and finds there is little difference between his vicious enemy and his vicious self, there would be little point to his blood-smeared "investigations." He and his enemy would appear to be all working futilely in the employ of death. We recall Ross Chambers's argument in *Untimely Interventions* that "culture produces itself as civilized by denying the forms of collective violence and other traumatic experience that it cannot control" (Chambers 2004). Though Chambers largely investigates the three mass traumas of AIDS, WWI, and the Holocaust, his argument about how a culture's denied violence erupts as an obscene ghost does echo through the torture chambers of *The Zero*. Repellent and counter to America's image as the "gift-giver" of democracy to a Middle Eastern dictatorship, the practices of coercion and torture of Iraqis and Afghans would stay hidden save for the ghosts that escape. I do not limit that escape solely to individual ghosts of their bodies, though these bodies do present themselves in both the fictions and non-fictions. Invasion, torture and rape (including that of children of 16 years of age, according to some U.S. military staff at Abu Ghraib [*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008]), and rampant killing by the occupying forces are horrors so overwhelming they create a social ghost. Like all ghosts, they cannot be completely identified, yet they cannot be safely ignored. This ghost interrupts torturers like Remy; it haunts soldiers wanting to hear the words "mission accomplished" with its fatal promise of more trauma. With its reminders of state violence, this social ghost haunts the peripheries of every American politician's glib or positive speech about advancements in peace, successful exports of American democracy,

reductions in sectarian violence. This social ghost points its arm at the increased military operations abroad and greater civil rights intrusions at home (including massive surveillance, arrest without warrant, and the extremes of torture heretofore discussed). I have built the case that sometimes neither perpetrators nor victims can fully remember or relate the horrors generated by the fires of 9/11. Yet that destroying of the language of the ordinary, that disabling of the circuitry that connects perception to symbol, also permits something extraordinary and alien to appear just as Lacan has argued: the Real may be glimpsed, though neither understood nor accurately described. As evidence, the most bizarre, unfamiliar, but beckoning parts of this novel happen at times of the towers falling and the tortures ensuing: these intense experiences resist and cast away all language, making this text (and the other novels examined) forbidding yet fascinating. Unencapsulated, undomesticated, and forever unrecognizable as anything else, such traumatic events can, as Žižek explained, emerge as a kind of phantom, for the “symbolization [of what we experience as reality] ultimately always fails, ... Never succeeds in fully ‘covering’ the real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt. This real (the part of reality that remains non-symbolized) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions” (Žižek 1994, 26). Certainly these “uncovered areas” of the Real reveal themselves when Remy takes to bed a ghost lover, becomes a ghost bartender, and hears his own lover says she is in love with another ghost and can no longer love Remy. No one effectively exists in the novel with the mechanisms to direct the traumata of the Real into the symbolic for Remy: his therapist is an appallingly poor listener and distracted questioner and eschews psychoanalysis in lieu of writing one more prescription for a psychotropic drug. The absence of psychoanalysis¹³ here indicates the enormous role left for readers: we become, for this novel at least, the de facto psychotherapist, reading for fixations, flashes, even sounds, scents, touches, and temperatures that Remy obsesses over, hoping to find what happened to him in that missing 12 hours on 9/11 and why he cannot move forward from the debris.

Following Žižek farther, we find a striking parallel in *Mapping Ideology* to *The Zero*. If we accept Žižek’s contention that “Spectral apparitions

¹³Not only in the novels of 9/11, but in the short stories and novellas of 9/11, trouble surrounds psychotherapy. In Stephen King’s meditative story “The Things They Left Behind” (2005), the protagonist tries to find a therapist to help with his 9/11 trauma (and deaths of his co-workers at the WTC), but he never makes it far enough up on the list to get help. Hauntings ensue for him and his neighbors.

emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the specter gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality” (Žižek 1994, 21), then an intriguing question arises. What does the specter either imply or ask that Remy should do? I contend that the shades Remy encounters concentrate his mind completely on what Žižek notes: the overturning, escape, freedom, and liberation from the old ways of behaving and perceiving. When Žižek notes, “Most people are terrified when they encounter freedom, like when they encounter magic, anything inexplicable, especially the world of spirits,” he captures the reaction of most characters in *The Zero* toward change and liberation and resistance toward a seemingly all-powerful authority represented by the U.S. government—its expanding surveillance and civil rights curtailments; its agencies, laws, and lawyers; and its invading, ultra-technological military. Paradoxically, the least hesitant and most coherent speech from Remy comes when he escapes from New York City for the West Coast and finds himself near the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco buying hippie clothes. In taking off his dark “spook suits,” he assumes a new identity wholly and comically so. To a Bay City bartender, Remy confides that he is Canadian, and further that his “ghost lover” Maggie (actually April Selios) “makes all our clothes. We eat only roots. In the summer we’re always naked. I have a pet moose” (Walter 2006, 244). The California barkeep apparently has heard this sort of thing before and obligingly nods.

Comprising one of the few moments of humor in a most dismal and literally ash gray novel, the freedom of the scene intoxicates Remy, who now calls himself “Derek,” then “Dustin,” and finally a name he finds the quintessence of “California cool”: “Steve.” His so-called phantom lover, regarding him in blue shirt with wild cuffs and stone-washed ripped jeans, can only gasp at the transformation that readers themselves can barely recognize: “Wow. We look hot, I kind of want to screw us” (Walter 2006, 241). No one has intimated this sexual charisma before of Remy—it has been just the opposite with his ex-wife and others, perpetually denying his sexual being and appeal. Remy is transforming, and the two times this happens in the novel both involve escape: the fleeing from a burning tower and the later flight from New York City, the center of world capitalism (and his torture facilities), to the Pacific Coast. Žižek would pointedly ask, “In what precise sense is freedom like a spectre?” (Žižek 1994, 27). In *The Zero*, the phantoms of 9/11 usher the option of freedom toward a character, which is sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected. In a remarkable

insight for this novel, Žižek contends that: “It is not sufficient to say that we fear the spectre—the spectre itself already emerges out of a fear, out of our escape from something even more horrifying: freedom ... [a moment to] confront the miracle of freedom” (Žižek 1994, 27). When Remy flees from the capitol of American capital to the capitol of American counter-culture, he detaches himself from the brutality of his government post, rejecting his position as a cog in the machine of state-run terrorism. He seconds his ghost girlfriend when she declares at a bar what might be the baldest indictment of the United States in the novel: “Fucking government. ... We just got so sick of America we couldn’t take it any more. At some point, a place loses enough of itself that you have no choice but to abandon it. And frankly, I think it’s gotten worse” (Walter 2006, 244). The most honest form of apology, here at least, is a total renunciation of his past, what he did, and the lies he plied. Remy is an analog to a draft dodger in his resistance, a reflective citizen in resistance mode. Indeed, the barman even makes a comment to him about the Vietnam War, and Americans wisely defying the political-military-industrial complex pulling strings behind another post-colonial war. What the barkeep cannot know is that this dodger calling himself “Steve” is one with classified secrets he could leak and that this could lead to major officials being prosecuted, including New York’s Mayor.

What unites the torturer and the tortured is often the fear of what is to come. The torturer fears prosecution under a new regime—this can be established in recent history by a former clandestine CIA Operations Chief Rodriguez destroying several video tapes of torture at Abu Ghraib. On the other hand, the torture victim fears new and more savage torture strategies and an unmarked grave, as well as attacks or incarcerations of his or her friends or family. Last, American and Allied military operating in terrorist combat zones fear capture and retaliation-torture. These revenge-fears help suggest the unknown horrors to come, which is Derrida’s stronger extension of the nature of trauma theory, acknowledging the return of the repressed, but also cognizant of fears of a more explosive cycle of death. Beyond this awful undermining by the United States’s own hand in Abu Ghraib and other sites—“represent[ing] a setback for America’s efforts in Iraq,” as the General Stanley McChrystal notes—it confirms Derrida’s assertion that in fighting terror, it soon becomes impossible to tell who is the greater terrorist. Thus, for this disruptive contemporary American history, we have imaginative texts like *The Zero* that are honest in their confusion. They form, through all their chaos and

ethical switchbacks, terribly accurate responses to turbulent and terroristic times. Though frequently called inadequate for not capturing the “totality” of disaster by a wave of initial reviewers, the novels of 9/11 still offer counter-stories (to the statist ones) that can register the obscenity of a war without end. Such counter-narratives have the best possibility to let out the ghosts. Ross Chambers comes at the same idea from another angle: “Politicians in these countries [at war] generally seem anxious to *lay* these ghosts, exhorting people to ‘turn the page’ and ‘move on’. They themselves forget that the ghosts can’t be laid without first allaying the injustices that are the present’s legacy” (Chambers 2004, 34). Relieving injustices, Chambers continues, seems “something that nations founded in violence appear constitutively unable to do, so definitional to them are violence and injustice” (Chambers 2004, 34). Evidence suggests that America, whose government has never issued a formal apology for slavery, for the genocide of Native Americans, or for wars of disproportion launched against Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, is such a nation founded in violence. The lack of official shame from the U.S. Government over its legacies of institutionalized violence makes texts like *The Zero* (where the government protagonist is contrite in the end) all the more valuable as they assume the status of an apology that we have never heard.

Before his flight to California, a dread circulates through Remy, who we may have first thought principally a 9/11 victim, but now consider principally a torturer for the state. We might deduce that he has finally filled in the gaps, too: he was in a room with a bomb suspect; the suspect is now dead; and Remy’s shoes all have blood on them. More and more, it is through their blood that ghosts will cry out in this novel, and it is this experience that links Remy to some of the guilty staff of Abu Ghraib. The murder of Manadel al-Jamadi in U.S. custody between 4 and 5 November 2003, for which no soldier or CIA official has yet served a prison sentence as of 2022, is still the one case that haunts the interviewed military personnel of Abu Ghraib more than others. It is a case that reveals the common “ghost-grounds” between Iraq War memoir/documentary and 9/11 fiction. In recorded interviews, the American military personnel from the Abu Ghraib scandal rise out of their nearly catatonic expressionlessness (as shown in the documentary *Standard Operating Procedure*) to a look of being haunted, with a grimace of regret and a desire (for some) to have acted differently in the past—this is the same look Remy reveals when anyone utters the name of Assan. In recollection, something awful screens before their eyes that “reality” could not cover over, some traumata

beyond any words, done by their own hand, a vision akin to the Lacanian Real as Žižek interprets it, that messy, inchoate non-substance that resists and exceeds language/symbolization. The torturers' reactions to questions also dramatize a paradox or what Derrida called "the most interesting thing about repression, ... What we were not able to repress" (Derrida 2003).

GHOST BARS AND FAMILIAR STRANGERS

Before promotion to a counter-terrorist, Brian Remy is, like many members of the NYPD from 9/11, one of the many sent down to the most expansive crime scene in American history to sift debris and find body parts for family identification. These include such Gothically gruesome parts as "a section of a woman's scalp—gray and stiff" (Walter 2006, 12) that Remy picks up, which absurdly receives a whole body bag to house it. In *From Landfill to Hallowed Ground: The Largest Crime Scene in America*, one of the few hardened and haunted police memoirs of 9/11 (besides the one that Walter ghostwrote for Police Commissioner Kerik), memoirist Detective Frank Marra reports "detectives from seventy-five different bureaus throughout the city were also heavily involved ... From the Public Moral units, to Narcotics, Organized Crime Control, the Gang Unit and more" to sift through debris at WTC and then at the dumping ground for all the debris, the Staten Island Landfill (Marra and Abbate 2015). This memoir raises the very striking fact that in real-life people see ghosts in times of terrorist trauma. At first slight in metaphor and poetry and suspense, but long on technical detail, Marra's account later astounds a reader in its paranormal dimension. Over a dozen of the officers at the Staten Island Landfill, where over 4500 pieces of human remains surfaced, were seeing the same ghost. An African-American woman in a 1950s Red Cross nurse's uniform holding a silver tray of sandwiches comes towards the sifters, but always before she gets within 50 yards, she vanishes. On the one hand, Marra discounts the appearances of her: "On many levels, they could be discredited by the workers' long hours, exhaustion, and the stress and tragedy that surrounded them on a daily basis" (Marra and Abbate 2015). On the other hand, the detective cannot say what *he* saw was false, either, and "couldn't get the sight of [her] out of [his] head" (Marra and Abbate 2015). This is a case of a "real" ghost torturing the eyes of survivors, but also their noses and tongues: "The food [she offered] would have been completely covered with dust before anyone could take a first

bite. The thought of eating in that area would be physically nauseating between the smells of cement, twisted steel, possibly human flesh, everything else mixed into the mud, and methane gas from the decomposing garbage” (Marra and Abbate 2015). And yet, no matter how sickening and sinister, Marra still wanted her to come closer. Most of the police offers were disheartened when she disappeared. She had some missing information that they were needing and are still longing for now.

Just as some characters can be patriots and freedom warriors one moment, but seem dangerous extremists the next, so too some characters seem alive in a memoir but at other times ghostly. None of the officers at the landfill can rationalize the spectral presence of the nurse that offers this bread of the dead. Marra can only end his account with a plea: “How many family members’ loved ones are still there, whose remains haven’t been found and identified? How many have had their ashes and remains uprooted and brought to this place? Why isn’t their [ghostly] presence believable?” (Marra and Abbate 2015). What is especially interesting about this non-fiction account, and which will be reflected in Walter’s novel, is that the apparition invites the living to take in, house, or incorporate some of the dead by eating of the loaves coated with human ash, a kind of objectified version of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s metaphor of partaking of the beloved dead within ourselves.

Torture flashbacks, 9/11 ghosts, and GWOT spirits have a nature that often defy the earliest planks in established psychoanalytic theory, along with post-Freudian interpretations and revisions. The key ghost of *The Zero* is March Selios, but her nature forces me to reformulate some of the better-known concepts on phantoms. Abraham’s often quoted words are important to keep in mind here to demonstrate how successfully the ghost of March Selios resists popular ideas of the ghost’s purpose: “More often than not, the dead do not return to reunite the living with their loved ones but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences. To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are predestined to haunt: the dead who have been shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave” (Abraham 1987, 287). March reverses the spectral tendencies and motivations that Abraham saw. First, the Gothic return of March does not reunite the protagonist to his “loved ones.” At novel’s end, the hatred for Remy by his ex-wife is as thorough as when the novel begins, and the separation from his son and the son’s public “mourning” of his still-alive father grows more flamboyant. But neither does this ghost March entrap Remy with

“disastrous consequences.” What evolves is that Remy only becomes aware and close to April through her sister March’s disappearance. His investigation of this lost one leads him to a lover: March’s death and Remy’s investigation ends in lovers meeting. March continues to break with the Abrahamic paradigm: March is not “shamed during [her] lifetime” as centuries’ worth of ghosts would be, but shamed only once she dies and becomes a suspected accomplice in the 9/11 terror. The third toppling of Abraham’s otherwise redoubtable characterization of ghost behaviors (symbolic or real) is that March manages to take no “secrets to the grave.” March, Remy finally discovers, did not escape the burning WTC before it falls. No Al Qaeda accomplice/boyfriend ever warned her of the WTC’s looming destruction by the jets. Instead, she left her office hurriedly to a higher floor, and into great mortal danger, only to be with her married lover for a few final moments. Thus, if March and other specifiers of 9/11 resist the long-held characterizations of ghosts, it should not surprise us that she is also upsetting prevalent psychoanalytic formulations.

Using Freud’s contradictory image of a “familiar stranger” (Freud 1909/2010), Remy beds the dead woman’s sister—a month later, making some consistent nod to their successive names in the calendric year—in what would appear a masqueraded, necrothanatopic reaching for March. Walter takes pains to establish Remy into a ghost realm. Remy looks like a ghost as he comes out of the WTC on 9/11, and he is a self-described ghost bartender at a ghost bar later. When he visits his girlfriend April, she says there are ghosts suddenly surrounding her in the apartment, and when the (apparently living) Remy visits his son, the teenager confides: “I’ve been through all the stages of grief. ... I’ve finally accepted your death” (Walter 2006, 279). But Remy’s understanding of his own taboo secret, that he is as a corpse to the living (especially his family), is not the only thing unbearable for him. Three things are impossible for Remy: proper mourning, true forgiveness, and complete memory. There is an impasse in decoding the secrets of what Remy does on the day of 9/11. Weeks after the disaster, Derrida argued forcefully that encompassing and understanding 9/11 does not happen because we have not the language to articulate it. Moreover, the American masses have not the courage to say that the West is conducting terrorism in itself, Derrida once added while interviewed close to Ground Zero. *The Zero* becomes the ultimate literary statement of that philosophy, and Remy’s silence (with a few exceptions in San Francisco) stands for the inability to articulate it. But in

a novel of so many unresolved doubts, Remy does provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether one can be the villain of one's own heroic story, the ghost of the tale one was searching for, and the somnambulist that one was all along trying to awaken.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Richard Gray's highly influential assessment that 9/11 novels fall lamentably short in reflecting how we understand trauma differently after 9/11, Walter shows a character ontologically obsessed, a man neglected by the mental health system, one wondering who exists anymore, including asking whether he himself is a phantom or if the people he killed are still alive. He reminds us of Arthur Fleck's darkest joke before pulling the trigger: "What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? *You get what you f**kin' deserve!*" (Todd Phillips 2019, *Joker*). Remy illustrates how the trauma paradigm shifted for survivors after the twin jet attack seen live around the world. Unlike Richard Gray's complaint that the 9/11 novels only incorporated the WTC fall into their larger "emotional entanglements," Remy has not simply "assimilated the unfamiliar into familiar structures" or "domesticated" the crisis. He in no way reduces "a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education" (Gray 2009, 134). Fractured and never made whole or "healed" through psychoanalysis or other means, our protagonist resists the prevailing negative evaluations of 9/11 fiction by intervening as both the interrogator and the victim, the enemy and (paradoxically) the unacknowledged cadaver.

Terrorism degrounded the WTC towers just as ghosts unsettle the psyche. Novelist of *Falling Man* (2007) Don DeLillo once imagined ghosts as those one-time living friends who enter one's body and further split one from one's family after trauma. Jonathan Safran Foer in his 2005 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* presented a ghost-chase that occurs after 9/11 where a 6th-grader survivor looks for his dead father after the Towers collapse and meets many along the way who are looking for their lost dead, as well. Through discoveries from the shared quest and grieving, some empathy with victims develops that comforts other survivors and relieves some of the self-contempt and self-blame they felt. Novelist Sharon Lynne Schwartz, for her part in *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), again features a possession ghost entering and giving the

protagonist a dismal, indulgent comfort until doppelgängers arise after 9/11, who convinces herself to sacrifice for others, which will anticipate Joyce Carol Oates' New York-set *Carthage*.

Rather than the ghost teaching ethics to her, Schwartz's protagonist Renata is taught by identifying with the living who are missing those they love. She returns the doppelgänger-waif she finds to the rightful parents who she had never met before, even though she was convinced (in her agony and mourning) that the child must be her own long-lost niece finally recovered. Walter, for his part, shares a protagonist who enters the North Tower to rescue, but becomes in need of a rescuer himself. In an attempt to explain all the book's improbabilities, I maintain that Remy is in actuality hospital bed-bound for almost the entire novel (even during times he claims he is flying from New York City to the West Coast and during moments he seduces women). His clandestine anti-terrorism adventures for the Mayor of New York City are phantasies sprung from a hospital room as the TV drones, replaying the Towers on fire for weeks, all which triggers his thoughts as he listens with eyes closed. *The Zero* mentions and summons ghosts incessantly, almost effortlessly, and more than any other novel investigated in this retrospective, Remy himself seems the chief cipher and prime ghost of the novel. If he is bed-bound almost the whole novel long, as I propose, nevertheless Remy's landscape of the mind and his journeys there are no less hazardous or less "real" than the still smoldering WTC plaza outside of his mind and may haunt us for a long time after.

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J. Robert Lennon's *Castle* (2009): Behaviorism, Protégés, & Ghost Detainees

Describing himself in interview as devoted to police procedurals and “psychological conundrums[s]” (qtd. in Kavanagh 2017) with plots full of relationship friction and psychological puzzles, J. Robert Lennon admits “I want to experience a very rich unknowing. And so my own writing has been moving in that direction as well” (Lennon 2013). Definitely in his Gothic inflected novel *Castle*, Lennon takes us into a rich unknowing: a trackless New York State wood, somewhat west of where he teaches near New York’s Finger Lakes at Cornell University, where we wander into the ambiguities he relishes. In this slow born of a novel, a man who grew up in the tiny invented town of Gerrysburg (population at just over 2000 souls) for reasons withheld till the novel’s last chapters returns there from the Midwest (post military service in Iraq) and buys over 600 acres in the forested wilderness with an old half-dilapidated house on the tract. Soon it is not only these New York woods that seem haunted and protean, but the house itself, in a manner evoking Shirley Jackson’s dwellings (in *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959) and Mark Z. Danielewski’s (with his best-selling debut novel, *House of Leaves*, 2000). Like these Gothic horror novels of the uncanny and deep uncertainty, nothing much in *Castle* is completely known—and objects like a particular house keep changing each time we look at it. Narrator Eric Loesch, a name from the Middle High German word *Lösch* meaning “fine leather” (which should give readers pause when they discover he once ran a prison in occupied Iraq

where inmates would die), buys a home which he initially shows no previous knowledge of, yet he should recognize as the home of a mad behaviorist who took B. F. Skinner's operant conditioning concept to lengths it should never ethically go to, and once controlled him with the positive reinforcers of praise, food, clothes, and shelter, training him via the negative reinforcers of fear and blows and sexual threats. Indeed, upstate New York was no stranger to Burrhus Frederic Skinner himself, who graduated from its Hamilton College in 1926 having majored in English, with hopes of becoming a novelist and poet (even receiving encouragement for his verse from Robert Frost). Like the protagonist Eric's life, Skinner's had surprises: it is inconceivable that this hyper-academic titan in the history of psychology and the pioneer of Radical Behaviorism was also a foundering bohemian artist in 1920s Greenwich Village as Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were starting their Jazz Age rise in American fiction from Paris. Reading Skinner's stiff classic *Science and Human Behavior* from 1953, which at many points sounds as pompous and blowhardish as a 1950s horror movie voiceover, makes it more unreal to believe he is really a poet in white lab coat surprise: "God has suffered his invention to take effect. And so has Man. ... Dreams of progress toward a higher civilization have been shattered. ... Men of good will find themselves helpless or afraid to act. Some are the prey of a profound pessimism. Others strike out blindly in counter aggression ..." (Skinner 1965, 4-5). We will see how Skinner's authoritarian voice will be hauntingly conjured and amplified in the voice and presence of Dr. Avery Stiles, the former occupant of the shadowy house Eric now owns. The house seems listing to one side, another day it is straight and plumb, and yet another day it lists to the other side. One morning the roof is sagging in; the next day it shows no depression, which is a mirror to its owner's psyche. All this information is fed to us by the narrator's senses, and a question (perhaps unsolvable as there are few witnesses to corroborate what goes on in the narrative) is whether he is becoming less or more reliable as the chapters progress.

Overarching all, *Castle* appears as a PTSD narrative, whose roots for trauma of the main character are his reaction to watching the collapse of the towers on 9/11, his future work as a prison designer and war logistics official within Iraq post-invasion. But trauma also happens much earlier when he was a child of 11 years old experimented upon under the supervision of a professor in psychology (at the fictional SUNY Milan campus). As Bessel van der Kolk has perceptively argued, which darkly blooms in Loesch's journey home, "Every new encounter or event is contaminated

by the past. Trauma affects the entire human organism—body, mind, and brain” (2014). Much like *The Zero*, this protagonist will have a stress mobilization over his whole mind and body that spring from different moments of trauma from his personal history and from our political history involving Iraq.

Kept puzzled himself about the triggering events for his unhealed wound and for the reasons of coming back to this sleepy New York hamlet until the two-thirds point of the novel, this is an exquisitely drawn tale of traumata that creeps up on us with the soft stealth of a deepening shadow in the corner of a room. It should be critically recommended to more readers because it shows the power of an author to build nearly unanswerable mysteries of what characters see and what drives them. Like every Gothic novel, the focus in the end becomes on power. In the torturous case of *Castle*, the power dynamic concentrates mostly on men, though the novel involves the protagonist's older sister, who reunites with him in Gerrysburg after decades of estrangement, and attempts an intervention from the harmful cycles her brother falls into. I interpret the book as an example where men feel powerless, but try to exert an imagined strength upon someone they consider their lesser. Beneath all the violence and blaming, all the shunning and shaming, there is continually one element, in my view: fear. Like elsewhere commonly in real life, many of the cast in this novel have a fear of not mattering, not being accepted, not fully heard, not living to their potential before they die. Their cruelty is also their inner cry. On the other hand, I detect that Lennon is cautioning us. Loesch may be the Frankenstein creature that an unbalanced behavioralist named Avery Stiles and the U.S. military formed, but Loesch's interpretation of what he himself did and why he did it should not be sympathized with. We should not let our subjectivization of him disable our reason and excuse his cruelty. It is too much an honoring of one former victim's post-trauma—who is now empowered and become a perpetrator—over the other trapped person's current trauma or even death. As Žižek forcefully argues, “In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley allows the monster to speak for himself. Her choice expresses the liberal attitude to freedom of speech at its most radical: everyone's point of view should be heard. In *Frankenstein*, the monster is fully subjectivised: the monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love” (2015). Being with the monster as his character develops, though, can soften our outrage and his culpability for his crimes. As Žižek finely puts it in discussing a radical Islamicist attack that led to deaths in Paris, “There

is, however, a clear limit to this procedure: the more I know about and ‘understand’ Hitler, the more unforgiveable he seems.... We have to abandon the idea that there is something emancipatory in extreme experiences, that they enable us to open our eyes to the ultimate truth of a situation. This, perhaps, is the most depressing lesson of terror” (2015). Here Žižek agrees and compliments with Derrida’s nuanced understanding of terrorism, which we examined in an earlier chapter.

Young Eric Loesch is not only wounded by the behavioralist professor. He has trauma at home, as well. In sight of his children, Brian Loesch (the narrator Eric’s father), a custodian at the local SUNY at Milan, tries to dominate his wife Cybele Loesch, a woman who gave up a golfing scholarship and some independence for him, a rueful mistake. This shadow terror in the novel reinforces what van der Kolk notes: “Since 2001 far more Americans had died at the hands of their partners or other family members than in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. American women are twice as likely to suffer domestic violence as breast cancer” (2014). Any neighbor’s house or even our own can be a battlefield: old wounds from others’ past wars cause fresh wounds for people who should be embraced, encouraged, and loved. Dr. Avery Stiles, the misguided SUNY psychologist with a hearty interest in LSD and psychological war, wants power over his department and over his field, but will settle for overpowering his own wife and daughter (who all three lived in the house Eric just bought, but for which Eric has traumatic amnesia over). The misbehaving behaviorist Dr. Stiles also manipulates the nearby Loesch family in the 1960s (after striking up some bond with janitor Brian Loesch at SUNY, who craves acceptance by a higher authority). Stiles dominates our narrator, who becomes his psychological subject and who the psychologist sometimes undresses. Thus, now Eric is on a revenge quest with some pieces of the retribution puzzle missing: he remembers and then forgets what he is doing or where he is. Dr. Stiles, though, never forgot who he was, steadily and stealthily training and making a Manchurian Candidate out of Eric. It is 1965, the morass of the Vietnam War is filled with losses for the Americans and South Vietnamese, new draftees are being sent from the United States to that hapless and most unlucky divided country by the thousands. But Dr. Stiles has a plan for success. He wants to make young men into unquestioning murderers at the master’s command, a new empire’s killer angels in the American Century. I intuit he dreams of Pentagon support; I believe he wishes to become the psychological Dr. Victor Frankenstein of modern warfare.

Certain commands could obtain absolute action; certain flags or reminders would stop the subject altogether, even to the point of suicide. In the era when Eric is a boy and Dr. Stiles is visiting his home, there would have been more signs in the press that the Vietnam War is not being won, despite the exaggerated body counts of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers issued by American generals back to their political leaders. By then, there would have been the perception that the U.S. volunteer army needed reconditioning, as they would not fight as hard or long as the Communist enemy, who were fighting for power, their home, and their children. Now for the operantly conditioned American soldiers, the thought goes in Dr. Stiles' maze of a mind, there could be success in the Vietnamese countryside and cities, and the potential for one psychologist at the imaginary SUNY Milan to become famous and wealthy from his pioneering methods. It is helpful to understand Dr. Stiles' plan if we get some perspective on from decades of research on American soldiers and their willingness to fight for long periods and to kill, even if they are drafted soldiers unlike those in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). One function of military training in any of the four American branches is to diminish one's natural inclination not to kill another human being: to just obey the order to fire at command. But this willingness has varied wildly in wars of American involvement: "During World War II, the U.S. government discovered that an estimated 15 percent of soldiers would aggressively and preemptively fire their weapons at enemy soldiers" (Orange County Public Defender 2020). Moreover, conscripts would deliberately shoot too high or too low, avoiding the warm and living human target, when they did fire. One could imagine this number to be unacceptably low in commanders' and even the American public's eyes. However, the Pentagon "eventually employed training methods similar to operant conditioning. By the time of the Korean War, it was estimated that 55 percent of soldiers would fire at the enemy without a thought" (2020). By the time of the Vietnam Conflict, America's longest war before OEF in Afghanistan, that firing rate emerged over 90 percent, and "this method of desensitizing soldiers to the act of killing accomplished the government goals" (2020). However, a firing rate of 90 percent may still not be high enough for Dr. Stiles' mission, especially if the soldiers collapse mentally and physically from the trauma. And so he sets at work harder, even employing LSD in his studies which harkens to the shocking CIA-funded programs from the 1950s through 1960s including MK-ULTRA—a "way to seize control of people's minds"

(Kinzer 2019a), which leads to one student subject trying to murder another. Finally, SUNY and its students endure enough and relieve Dr. Stiles of his duties, and he (apparently) is not officially employed in academia again. To give this perspective, though, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, the chemist who was the Godfather of the CIA hallucinogen program, would do much worse: he spent \$240,000 to buy “the world’s entire supply” of LSD not only to administer “and experiment on ‘expendables’ at secret prisons abroad, but also to feed LSD to witting and unwitting Americans” (Kinzer 2019b). Such clinical arrogance and cruelty—and insiders’ resistance to it who paid with their lives—are well acted in Netflix’s six-part docudrama from Errol Morris, *Wormwood* (2017). But in *Castle*, such resistance to evil in the name of science comes too late. The novel leaves out whether Dr. Stiles looked for opportunities directly in the U.S. military, which I imagine would have been abundant during the Vietnam War, reading the investigations there of unethical experimentation (Marks 1991; Lee and Shlain 1992; McCoy 2006; Beckner et al. 2022). One aspect that shadows the whole of this novel is also raised by the public defender’s office that handles homelessness, drug abuse, and arrests of veterans in Orlando: “However, such conditioning also made returning to civilian life and abiding by a substantially different set of rules and principles a daunting task for veterans” (2020). Who is there to give orders and duties to the veteran once he or she returns from the battlefield? This becomes the problem for Eric Loesch. Suddenly all direction, even those loathsome directives to kill whoever you are commanded to, is lost.

In their indispensable work *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies* (2021), editors Peter Beresford and Jasna Russo trace the antipsychiatry movement back to the 1960s, and if clinical psychologists and professors of psychology (both of which Dr. Stiles is, and professionally active around 1965) were allowed reign then for their unethical and profit-induced experiments, one can see easily understand why. It is yet one more sad epoch where those who most need help with their mental disturbances, or even a modicum of sympathy or empathy, find themselves so relentlessly mistreated. Moreover, Dr. Stiles’ work is taking people who are mentally healthy and subjecting them to enough psychic and physical torture, that of course they succumb to mental disease and even suicidal ideation. Dr. Stiles teaches the boy many odd and Gothic things: for one, he chloroforms the child, and strips him naked, and lies beside him; encloses him in a wooden hutch; for another, he teaches him how to wound a living being by leaving the few marks, perhaps as an interrogation

skill Eric could use later (they start by torturing squirrels that they find outside the forest, keeping them in pain as long as possible before dying). What is more, the forest where the doctor's home is as well as his castle, and now Eric's home, is one that Dr. Stiles, a man of dispassionate science elsewhere, swears is haunted, tainted by White settlers in the early 1800s butchering all of the (entirely invented) Kakeneoke tribe of Native Americans: "The massacre happened here" (Lennon 2009), the doctor says straight out of a Charles Brockden Brown novel like *Edgar Huntly* (1799): "Whatever force or substance or idea that has tainted these woods, is what sickened and killed my wife and daughter. Somehow, the essence of the massacre has remained here, in the ground, in the very trees and wind and water, and has retained the power to kill" (Lennon 2009). Brockden Brown is often called "the Father of American Fiction," which makes us sense lingering patriarchy, and to ask who is "the Mother of American Fiction," and why is she not mentioned in the same breath? Brockden Brown may be more fairly termed the earliest American novelist that people still read. Influenced by the revolutionary dialectics of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and in correspondence with them, Brockden Brown's first quartet of novels was read by their child Mary Shelley and her poet lover, Percy. This Brockden Brown quartet (*Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar Huntley*, and *Arthur Mervyn* [Brown 1798/1799/1998]) is mentioned in the letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, and seems to have influenced Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* creation and the editing attempts by Percy, as well (Peacock 1909). Peacock notes Percy Shelley called Brockden Brown's first four novels "works of genius ... The superstitious terror of romance could scarcely be more strongly excited." Of *Edgar Huntly; or, the Sleepwalker*, Percy's "imagination was strangely captivated by the picture of Clitheroe in his sleep digging a grave under a tree" (Peacock 1909, 36). It is a fact not to be forgotten when contending with American literature that this culture's first novels to cast any shadow are shadowy novels. A few sentimental and imitative novels exist from Americans before Brockden Brown, but none are remembered save for the specialist in historical publishing. America's first remembered novelistic voice, its first sound from what was *The Wilderness*, is a Gothic sob. It is the cry that never went away. True, an uncommonly smug critic for *The Edinburgh Review* Sydney Smith, could write in 1820: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American statue?" (qtd. in Lathrop 1876). But the first writer of a novel of science fiction had

already heard the American cry, and this woman Mary Shelley changed forever the understanding of the monsters we make yet cannot parent, those sad eyed ones made enraged, who wait to destroy us, and then cry over our corpses after they are done with the chase. Staying in our mind is Brockden Brown's novel *Edgar Huntly*: it is of Indians (blamed for an unsolved murder), war memory, madness, vengeance, and attempts to control others. All these elements are still playing out in American fiction, as is evidenced by *Castle*. Lennon's words, like Brockden Brown's prose, still summon whatever is dangerous in the forest, and marries that to whatever is murderously paranoid in American characters. It is true in *Castle* there is seen neither insect nor mammal alive or their tracks spotted in the woods when Eric walks through them as a boy or now as an adult, only an occasional bird flying overhead, and Stiles offers that as evidence of the paranormal curse. What will keep the child Eric and mentor safe, the Professor insists, is their core of strength and the apparently obvious fact, to Dr. Stiles, that "We are destined for greatness. Don't forget that" (2009). That Stiles is insane after this comment seems harder to question.

Such speech with notions of grandeur and degrading behavior toward Eric raises the question of who are the literary progenitors of Dr. Stiles, besides possibly Carwin, the "biloquist" from another Brockden Brown novel (his debut, *Wieland*), a stranger who can speak in different people's voices and seems to command the key character Theodore to kill others. How can we position Dr. Stiles on the literary character map of these human monsters from fiction, before we align him with Gothic doctors from our time who are real and work in the GWOT? Many mad doctors in literature evoke, to some degree, the single-minded brilliance and passion and depression and avoidance of the result that is Dr. Frankenstein. But Stiles is more a doctor of the mind, a fiend of the head. He reminds us of Patrick McGrath's striking oeuvre on unwell mental health practitioners, McGrath being the son of Dr. Patrick McGrath senior, who (along with family living at the gates of the facility) was the longest serving medical superintendent of what was Broadmoor Lunatic Asylum near London. From the meddling yet innocent-sounding psychologist of *Asylum* to abusive psychologists in many of his short stories (all collected in the World Fantasy Award retrospective, *Writing Madness* [McGrath 2017]) including "The Other Psychiatrist" and "Vigilance," McGrath shocks. There are more trauma-causing psychologists below that may have influenced Lennon's portrayal of Dr. Stiles' cold and insatiable desire to control his subject, yet seem detached and academically bland when questioned, included a large number of doctors that are

even catalogued from both highbrow and popular fiction sources (some of which we can see at *TV Tropes*): Dr. Gordon (featured in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, 1963), Dr. Hannibal Lecter (from *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1988, by Thomas Harris), Dr. John Melvin (of Robert K. Parker's *Shrink Rap*, 2002), Dr. Lilith Ritter (*Nightmare Alley*, 1946, by William Lindsay Gresham), Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925, by Virginia Woolf), Dr. Peter Teleborian (*The Millennium Trilogy – The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire, The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, 2005–2007, by Stieg Larsson), Dr. William Haber (*The Lathe of Heaven*, 1971, by Ursula K. Le Guin), Dr. Mark Ahriman (*False Memory*, 1999, by Dean Koontz), Dr. Fiona Westfield (*Halfhead*, 2009, by Stuart B. MacBride), Dr. Emmett Meridian (in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* 2004, by Jeff Lindsay) and of course Scarecrow / Dr. Jonathan Crane, a medical foe of Batman's first appearing in *World's Finest Comics* Number 3 in 1941 (Staff 2022). Several chapters could be written on all the twistedly inventive ways these doctors dupe, rape, and manipulate—and even cause their patients to want to end their lives, sometimes succeeding in killing them by command.

What may be more arresting is to examine doctors practicing now some of Dr. Stiles' treatments and behavior modification techniques. In many ways, Lennon's novel is predicting abuses and revelations we would discover years later. Dr. Stiles sounds diabolical until one considers the more extreme true story of as documented by Academy Award winner (for Afghan war feature, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, 2007) Alex Gibney in his 2021 HBO documentary *The Forever Prisoner*. Director Gibney, patiently obtaining heavily redacted CIA records through the Freedom of Information Act, learned of an Al Qaeda suspect caught early in the GWOT in Pakistan. This Saudi man, Abu Zubaydah, became "Patient Zero for the CIA's torture programme. That's the reason to investigate his story because you learn how the rule of law was upended" (qtd. in Smith 2021). This variety of cells in Black Out sites have functioned as modern obliettes from an ancient castle, and this GWOT suspect resembles an endungeoned, long forgotten man inside a Gothic novel. Zubaydah has been suffering in American custody ever since 2002 as an "enemy combatant" without charge and without ever being afforded the basic right of a trial. Like a torture victim in a Gothic novel, he seems endlessly abused, sometimes on a whim (according to interviewees who were present including veteran FBI agents Ali Soufan and Stephen Gaudin, both able to get information from Zubaydah without abuse, and then appalled

by his treatment later by the CIA and contractors). Zubaydah sits and rots at the prison that is part of the unresolved and fortune-costing legacy of 9/11, Guantanamo.

I need to gratefully acknowledge that nine other essential documentaries influenced my philosophy and this study of the weakness inside all of the West's 23 projected strength and heedful judgment, and I rewatched their revelations on our decision-making numerous times. A wider audience deserves them: *The Ground Truth* (dir. Patricia Foulkrod, 2006), *Hell and Back Again* (dir. Danfung Dennis, 2011), *No Greater Love* (dir. Justin Roberts, 2017), *Once a Marine* (dir. Stephen Canty, 2020), *Restrepo* (dir. Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger, 2010), *Of Men and War* (dir. Laurent Bécue-Renard, 2014), *On the Bridge* (dir. Olivier Morel, 2010), *Armadillo* (dir. Janus Metz, 2010), and *Delay, Deny, Hope You Die* (dir. Gregory W. Lovett, 2017). No Hollywood stars here, and no pretty deaths, glam tortures, nor smoothly rebalanced soldiers re-integrating into society. Not a one of them won an Oscar. These documentaries are the lived, ragged experiences of men and women as grunts, and it is hard for a viewer to turn away from them once the camera rolls. Even the soldiers' boredom is revealing, and each squad member has unforgettable insights. Two sentiments from them suggest in brief how harrowing their experiences were. One returning infantryman admits in *Once a Marine*, "My wife's so proud of me. So how could I tell her about the dead kid I saw lying on the side of the road? ... Then I'd be going from being a hero to a monster" (2020). Another who joined the Marines at 19 and was sent to the grand chaos of Iraq confesses in *The Ground Truth*: "There's times I'm glad I'm alive, and then there's times I wish'd it woulda killed me" (2006). How did this come to pass? The mindful filmmakers give us some of the most visceral and moving combat documentaries yet made and go far to answer this question of the causes of PTSD.

Trauma-producing himself was American psychologist Dr. James Elmer Mitchell. He arrived before prisoner Zubaydah being held years earlier at a Black Site in northern Thailand as one of the advisors to the CIA for executing Zubaydah's regimen of tortures. Curiously, before engaging in advising on the torture of enemies, Dr. Mitchell like Dr. Stiles, had an interest in making American troops stronger and more able to face adverse conditions and torture if captured by the enemy. He had co-invented the US Air Force's "Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape" (SERE) training program. This intense training helps American soldiers withstand capture and pressure by enemy forces to avoid giving the adversary any

reconnaissance they could use and to avoid damaging the United States publicly. Convincing the CIA that he and his psychologist associate Dr. John “Bruce” Jessen could assist in the torture program of Al-Qaeda suspects, he and Jessen secured a contract for their services, according to a “U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee report in 2006, valued in excess of \$80 million” (Daly 2017). The developed a “menu” of cruel and dehumanizing tortures that CIA interrogators could conveniently select from for the “enhanced interrogation” of the GWOT enemy combatant. To give an idea of Dr. Mitchell’s ideas for gathering information from Zubaydah, it is necessary to report what an ordeal this suspect underwent at the hands of CIA contractors and direction of Dr. Mitchell: eighty-three applications of waterboarding in one month alone, leaving the suspect begging for his life at some points and unconscious at others, where a medical doctor would be consulted to see when the suspect would be healthy enough to torture further (Gibney 2021). The CIA also held the suspect more “than 11 days in a coffin-sized box, and twenty-nine hours in an even smaller box just 21 inches wide, 2.5 feet deep and 2.5 feet high” (Gibney 2021). The CIA shamefully let this suspect defecate upon himself day after day in a coffin is abuse that even Gothic novels may shrink from. Indeed, how is this American doctor less reprehensible than the Nazi doctors working in the concentration camps? Proof positive that the CIA rushes in where the Gothic fears to tread, these are violations that a court of war crimes should consider taking up against the United States. They are a clear and epic violation of a suspect’s right to live his life (for over 20 years now) and to be listened to and defended. The uncharged Zubaydah’s unending torture is delivered compliments of the country whose constitution guarantees its people the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The United States’ security agencies, especially the CIA, may be even more vicious to suspects after the fires of terrorism next time, showing no limits and more willingness to kill anyone in their custody during our next GWOT action if they are not interrogated and held responsible now. America has resisted The International Criminal Court at the Hague (whose charge it is to prosecute war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and crimes of aggression). However, if the United States commends it when other countries send their violators to that court, or extradites foreign nationals from our shores when such accusations have been formerly charged, then to avoid the hypocrisy of a double standard or the gross entitlement of “American exceptionalism,” the United States

must offer the same treatment toward its egregious violators from the American security agency sector.

To help us orient ourselves through this GWOT violence and its traces in *Castle* now, and to appreciate its PTSD and Gothic nature, the following must show several spoilers for and disquieting events from the novel: *Caveat Lector*. Lennon is a prose master of misdirection and the images of a haunted wood and possessed house figure largely in the book. The woods he buys seem pathless; few hunters go there because they become so lost in its bowl-shaped forest. Beyond that, half a mile from the bought house is a rock outcropping of at least 120 feet. What bothers the narrator is the growing sense of identities and ownership being hid from him. How dare someone own a jutting rock in the middle of his property and the real estate agency keep that from him until after the sale?! What also seems Gothically weird is that the narrator keeps sensing the occupants who lived in the house before him in shade-like terms: amid the cobwebs and dust, he perceives nightly company of a strained family “of thin, gray figures, silently hunched over a dark mahogany table, their eyes closed, their hands hanging inertly at their sides. And I pictured them covered with white sheets, as if in storage, and the sheets furred with decades of dust” (Lennon 2009). Creepier still, the longer he stays, the more populated by intrusive spectres the house becomes, so much so he grows almost blandly accustomed to it, taking an “oh well” attitude: “I thought that I smelled flowers, and then gunpowder, and then burning wood. Ghostly flashes burst at the edges of my vision. I believed, several times, that someone was walking stealthily through the rooms, and I crept downstairs, knife in hand, to investigate. But no one was there, and I never discovered the source of the sound” (2002).

Going out into the woods surrounding his new home does not help to calm him, in part because of the lack of life there. There is only one creature he sees besides himself and that is an all-white deer. Not an albino deer, he insists, for the eyes are not the telltale pink. This eerie deer seems not threatening, but it does lead him to the castle on the outcropping of rock, and even guides him to and then out of a pit he falls into (twice through this novel)—a pit equipped with sharpened stakes at its trough, enough to puncture a lung or sever an artery and leave a man or woman to bleed out, helplessly and unheard, in the wilderness he now owns. He has another vision at his house, where the daughter of Dr. Stiles, who died young and may have had an incestuous relationship with her father, appears in a white nightgown, leads him out of his house, and into the

woods. She falls into the pit bristling with spears, and then disappears somewhere. As he approaches, while perhaps sleepwalking himself, he sees that he is looking at the rim of the pit and sees himself inside it, and then (the second time) sees an Iraqi child in place of himself inside it. When he awakens from all this, he does see a white nightgown-covered lump on his yard. He goes down and finds it is not the daughter but the white deer there that has met him throughout this novel. It is freshly dead, its eyes barely glazed, and it has been shot with an arrow. The point on the arrow is an arrowhead and not a modern metal one. The deer may have stood for the daughter whose little pictures he finds in the house, his own innocent younger state, and some sage-of-nature guiding him to places necessary to complete his hero's (or antihero's) journey.

So many questions form for readers about why there are no other animals, and who digs the pits, and why the snow-white deer appears that a secondary strangeness swells beneath not noticed until too late. There is another man in this wilderness. A second goer. But there are no witnesses save for Eric Loesch, and who can trust Loesch's impressions as he is war-damaged, full of lapses and dissociation, and trauma has caused him select amnesia? We discover in time that a chunk of his life has been just a preparation for some operation, and that he is still in that mission thinking—even as he resolves to change his ways. All leads to the revelation that he's still part of an experiment by a mad doctor, one who Loesch loathes but also loves as a strong father figure.

Later in the novel, he passes by his childhood home in Gerrysburg, the place where his parents (who often fought over whether the boy should ever see Dr. Stiles) died by gunshot. Eric believes his father was only cleaning his gun it accidentally discharged on the mother, and then his father took his own life out of anguish. The voice of reason in the novel, Loesch's older sister Jill who Eric rejoins temporarily, identified the bodies in the morgue and insists their father deliberately killed their mother (and her journals have recorded what seems to be sexual predation by the father). All of this family shame, blame, and guilt are too much for Eric, and he invents and stands behind his alternate, less Gothically grotesque version of their family romance. But the suicidal father's pistol is still Eric's. In fact, he took it with him to Iraq as he designed and took command of a prison for GWOT detainees, located at the real Anaconda Air Base forty miles north of Baghdad (Figs. 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3), giving the book a patina of suicide rehearsal throughout. Indeed, as the acting head of an Iraq detention center, where regular sweeps of people on streets are deposited (Fig. 3.4), Eric commits the book's central crime.



Fig. 3.1 “Our corner of Anaconda was desolate ...” (*Castle*). Logistics Support Area Anaconda was the second largest air base in Iraq, and home to the protagonist’s designed “Camp Alastor.” The fateful murder of a detainee takes place here in the novel. Originally named Al-Bakr Air Base, it was captured by U.S. armed forces in April 2003. In November 2011, with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, it was handed back to the Iraqis and renamed Balad Air Base. (Photo: PDUSG)

He privately takes a boy suspect into his office. Eric cannot get the boy to obey. The jailed child’s whistle upsets Eric in a way a shock stimulus might upset a rat in some Skinner cage. By his behavioral control methods internalized by Dr. Stiles, he interrogates the boy (who Eric says he saw as himself, and only wanted to “help”), and abuses him so terribly the boy dies. There is a blackout in Eric’s brain. It is as if he has killed the double of himself. In a daze throughout the following days, Eric takes out the pistol and spends time cradling it, considering extinguishing his own life. As it happens, Eric never serves prison time for killing a boy. All records are adjusted to make the death seem an accident, and Eric is ushered into the witness protection program soon after giving testimony. Thus another Abu Ghraib-like scandal is avoided by the U.S. government. A prison’s and military staff’s war crimes are scrubbed white, and its malefactor is given funds by the military to last him for life. No work is required from the hidden Loesch, only silence and a low profile, and hopefully reporters’ questions will quietly go away. However, some compulsion drives Eric Loesch out of



Fig. 3.2 Life imitates Art: The U.S. Army dubbed it the “Freedom and Hope USO Tour” at LSA Anaconda, Iraq, on Dec. 23, 2005, but to film watchers it more closely resembled the ill-fated Playboy Playmate dance before sex-starved soldiers rush their stage in *Apocalypse Now* from 1979. (Photo: PDUSG)

living easily in a well-off neighborhood in the American Midwest: he gets in a car and returns to the upstate New York of his youth on quixotic and unfinished business.

Readers must wonder if Dr. Avery Stiles is truly alive when Loesch arrives in Gerrysburg as an adult. Whether the doctor exists anymore, or is a full-fledge phantom only Loesch sees and others in this wilderness would see, or merely a phantasm or embroidered memory of trauma like a blood



Fig. 3.3 A Little USA: Unidentified cheerleaders of America’s greatest football team, the Dallas Cowboys, arrive to gyrate two nights before Christmas at the otherwise stark, vast, and barren LSA Anaconda in a Muslim land that neither plays football, wears hot pants, nor celebrates Christmas as an official holiday. (Photo: PDUSG)

stain in the protagonist’s mind remains vexingly unclear. The writer himself has written me by email saying “the answers are in the book.” However, Lennon has so finally chiseled this GWOT novel with so many intricacies and ambiguities that it is difficult to ever convincingly tell which of these three versions is the “awful truth,” so we remain lost and confused as Eric. All said, Loesch’s impressions are so quixotic, so often misleading and



Fig. 3.4 U.S. soldiers searching outside LSA Anaconda for weapons trafficking and attackers. (Photo: PDUSG)

filled with lacunae, that mystery has oozed from this first-person account from the first page to its final.

What is not doubted is that Eric is still suffering. Even as an adult, Eric reports multiple captures, druggings, interrogations, clothing removals, and searing interrogations and judgments by the psychologist Stiles who must be in his 80s now if still alive, unless Eric imagines all of this. The elderly doctor, or the ghost of the doctor, near the end of the novel offers Eric surprising advice, still macho and over-affirmative perhaps, but also true and therapeutic, in that Eric's time should no longer be wasted on searching: "You think that by taking my life, your own will be restored. The fact is, Eric, that you cannot restore your own life by killing me. Furthermore, your life doesn't need to be restored" (Lennon 2009). When Eric comes as a grown man back to The Mad Doctor's castle, armed with crossbow and arrows in his quiver, intent to not be ridiculed and molested again, Dr. Stiles gives one more piece of advice: Your life "merely needs to be seized. And my life—my life was never here to be taken" (2009). The doctor says this just as he jumps off the castle roof to the

boulders below washed by moonlight. Eric releases his arrow at him, catching the doctor's back in mid-flight. What kills the evil doctor first? The arrowhead tip fastened by Eric or the doctor's stones from his property far below? There seems no way to know: it is as if the perpetrator doctor (like his perpetrator trainee Eric) has escaped justice. As we would expect, the doctor has fixed the game, as well: the arrowhead shot by Eric was one Stiles chiseled himself. Eric merely attached it. Stiles, ever the Skinner-figure to insist on projecting strength and control and ego (Skinner, we remember, named the protagonist from his 1948 utopian novel, *Walden Two*, after his own first name), laden with all the answers to today's puzzled and weak man—if he would only listen—moves confidently even to death (Skinner 1948). Meticulous Dr. Stiles leaves nothing to chance and smashes his head satisfactorily, like a zucchini shot toward a rockpile. Twin elements of death near the Gothic castle were controlled by Dr. Stiles and of his making. One of the darkest points of the book is that one can lead one's evil master to the grave, but never escape the influence: characters seem doomed in GWOT media to follow villains' footsteps and crimes. Eric looks at the body of Dr. Stiles as Frankenstein's creature might look at Dr. Frankenstein's corpse. Eric says to only us, "I have had the misfortune of seeing many corpses in my lifetime, and have been witness to all manner of misery and brutality, ... But something about Avery Stile's lifeless form, its crumpled brokenness, its stark corporeality, filled me with disgust and fear. I trembled ... I knelt beside the dead Doctor and choked back a sob. I had murdered my teacher! ... The rain fell, and I crouched there in the dim" (2009). In an unmissable *Frankenstein* nod in *Castle* (though outside the frozen wastes where Victor Frankenstein would perish on Captain Walton's ice-lodged ship, inflexible as characters' own minds), after the death of the master teacher in the woods, the thunder rolls, the lightning cracks most deafening, the moon emerges behind a bank of black clouds, and Eric drags the Doctor's body to the castle wall and drops him on to the flagstones. A Gothic tribute has been made, and a black veil dropped over the Doctor, but tearing the veil and peering through it is the ghost of unfinished mourning, the true monster is the memory of the unacknowledged murder. Eric, in commanding an innocent Iraqi boy (who was much like himself, was a child being toyed with for sport by powerful and unbridled forces), ends up beating the boy to death in his own office. Such hypocrisy is all too much for the likes of Glasgow stand-up comedian/journalist Frankie Boyle. As Boyle sardonically put it (in a potent line which could have come from Mark Twain's

“The War Prayer,” if Twain lived in the era of the GWOT and age of cinema): “American foreign policy is horrendous ‘cause not only will America come to your country and kill all your people, but what’s worse, I think, is that they’ll come back 20 years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad” (qtd. in Spencer 2016). Who has mourned this Iraqi child or atoned for the terrible loss of life of hundreds of thousands more of them during the GWOT? A remarkable lack of self-awareness is present that births ghosts.

One of the many successes of this novel is the arrival of outrage in a reader: It is as if trauma for the perpetrator soldier is “legitimate” and such suffering should be analyzed (because he is the narrator and we are inside his mind). But the murder of this child Sufian from *Castle*, whose point of view is never entered into by us and whose suffering is not articulated, must be imagined by us. We become this boy. He is not to be forgotten, even if the U.S. military wants it so. Indeed, in the novel’s last chapter, the black suburban of a U.S. Department of Defense official can be seen driving up to Eric’s house, which was once the mad Doctor’s. Without leaving the seat, the driver gives a quick signal that Eric understands, and then Eric seems not alarmed but relieved. He heads to the vehicle in an act that seems a getaway from guilt, and he leaves the house of spirits that the Doctor made, and that Eric used his hush money to buy. His profile has apparently become too high in wee Gerrysburg, and apparently the American military fear the ghost of his story of an Iraqi boy’s murder haunting the town. Once more, the one-time trauma victim and present-time perpetrator Loesch walks away from any punishment. May a small unquiet ghost follow him wherever he goes.

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Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* (2014): Death, Maidens, & Revenant Witnesses

Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* is in part the story of hometown golden boy Brett Kincaid of Carthage, New York. An actual town of under 4000 people, Carthage is about 200 miles northeast of Oates' own hometown of Lockport, New York, with a current population of under 20,000 people. Named after the Tunisian city historically destroyed by the Romans during the Third Punic War in 146 BCE, destroyed again by Umayyad armies in 698 CE, and blasted by the Hafsid Dynasty around 1270 CE, the name Carthage has the Gothic resonance of a ruin. Over 2000 years, its land was razed, its soldiers were killed, and its living civilians enslaved. It is the appropriate name for a place contending with memory and trauma. It also happens to be the 1948 birthplace of one of America's most treasured directors of urban legend horror, possession, Lovecraftian mystery, Satanic excess, Gothic revenge, and weird little brothers. From his *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1980), *Escape from New York* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), *Christine* (1983), *Prince of Darkness* (1987), to *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), John Carpenter has haunted viewers with tragic threats at the edge of life that creep closer. Sleepy Carthage, New York, then, named after a city of continual tragedy and home to artists who meditate on the monstrous, becomes the locus of a family's tragedy when their university freshman daughter Cressida (Cressie) Mayfield goes missing. Another family's tragedy ignites in Carthage when its son Corporal Brett Kincaid is blamed for the kidnapping and probable murder of Cressie. What powers

and emotionalizes *Carthage* is not the mistreatment or killing of underage terrorist suspects as in *The Zero* or *Castle*, but another kind of crime more frequent in the fictions of Joyce Carol Oates where Death and the Maiden meet, which I will argue is based on a true-crime one which may be the most painful (and sensationalized by enemy terrorists including Al Qaeda) in all of America's tragic involvement in the Iraq War (2003–2011). An astonishing, emotionally draining page-turner of novel with an ingenious structure to build suspense and surprise, the ghost of a killed child comes back with the Corporal when he returns to his fiancée in upstate New York, and will help to shatter the town named after the storied ruined city of Roman hatred.

What we know of life in the small town where Oates grew up, like Carthage itself, was that life was frequently traumatic, and few legal responses or remedies existed for its victims. In speaking of wife abuse and the beating of children by parents that occurred in her home town in the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, she recalls that no one would think to call law enforcement about it, and “the cops wouldn't come out for *that*” (Oates 2022). Such victimhood, broken taboos, overbearing patriarchal power, and constant shadow have formed the storehouse of Joyce Carol Oates' ingenious art. Oates pondered on an online *Master Class* over some of the earliest emotional memories which still come back to her as triggers for her writing. It was of Lockport neighbors:

We lived next door when I was a girl to a family that was terrorized by their own father. So I was friendly with the girl... I remember my own father going next door and trying to stop this violence. And how my father almost got killed. This man had a gun.... And there were no police offers, and nobody would ever think of calling the police. These subjects are really very haunting to me. I'm thinking of the girl next who was my friend and was a year older ... that girl wrote to me for years. I'm still in contact with that world. If one can face the darkest elements in oneself and things that are secret and buried, there's a great deal of power. An interesting paradox ... the most powerful writing often comes from areas that are repressed, that one doesn't want to talk about but it's so irresistibly interesting for people who share that predilection or share certain obsessions that you will have an almost guaranteed audience. (2022, 3:59–5:01)

Similar unpredictable violence and dubious rescue occurs in *Carthage*, even if the novel takes place much later than Depression Era America. *Carthage* unfolds from July 2005 to April 2012, but even if small town

New York state law enforcement will now come out to the house and investigate domestic abuse cases, sometimes the partner attacked (as in this novel) may neglect to press charges.

This restraint by his girlfriend victim happens in *Carthage* where the kind, beautiful, and understanding Juliet Mayfield, daughter of the mayor as well as the fiancée of returning Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran Brett Kincaid, is hit and bruised in the face by her Intended. He is a soldier with PTSD and massive brain injuries from war trauma who often is dissociative, reliving combat when someone Stateside says or does something (innocently enough) that his body-memory perceives as a triggering act of harm. Juliet excuses the blow and tells everyone it was just her careless fall. But the fall is all Corporal Kincaid's.

Kincaid's metamorphosis is a shocking one and a cautionary tale. Eight years before the abuse of his fiancée, he was a constant defender to the bullied in school, a friend and dinner-buddy to kids whose parents were missing or constantly inebriated, and a B student remembered as never downgrading anyone. Feeling the patriotic fervor of President Bush's call to action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, however, he enlists for the army just days after the fall of the Twin Towers. Two years later, he will be sent as part of an infantry unit searching and destroying insurgents near Baghdad, and especially near the vast oil field of Kirkuk during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He serves two tours there, which makes him a double fool in his mother's eyes, as she senses the war is launched to satisfy President George W. Bush's revenge against Saddam Hussein for that dictator's supposed plot against his father the first President Bush, as well as for American control of oil and expansion of profits in firms with connections to the White House. In Corporal Kincaid's second disastrous tour of duty, after witnessing traces of rape of an Iraqi girl and the killing of her family by his platoon, Kincaid is attacked in what is either enemy combat (intentionally drawn there by his own fellow soldiers) or possibly fragging—by a “frag” (slang left over from the Vietnam War era for a “fragmentary grenade” fired by American soldiers in one's company) fired at him, burying Kincaid under a wall. He is stricken with wounds afterward that disable him physically and mentally: an eye socket is gouged, for instance, and he lists as he slowly walks now (though he once was an impressive high school football player). In an even sadder twist, upon coming back to Carthage, his scarred face scares children in the town where he used to be praised for his handsomeness. Most disturbingly, he ends up accused and found guilty of killing 19-year family-friend Cressida Mayfield not long after his Stateside

return. He confesses to killing her in a lawyer-free interrogation lasting 7 hours while he suffers extremes of PTSD before the single-minded detectives determined to peg him with the crime. The drunk, pill-popping, traumatized veteran, vengeful against the society which sent him to face death and unable to control his rage, seems the easiest angle for arrest, a quick *mea culpa*, and swift conviction in their lazy, prejudiced, and unimaginative minds. A judge sentences him to 15 to 20 years (without a backward glance as he leaves the courtroom for His Honor's Lounge) to be served at the Dannemora prison for voluntary manslaughter of the teenager who happens to be the sister of his one-time fiancée, Juliet Mayfield. Dannemora, sometimes called "Little Siberia," is an actual high security prison that Oates remembers on the New York/Ontario border, and its moniker fits the landscape holding Kincaid as he becomes more and more like Dostoyevsky's Siberian inmate Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*. Their fictive bond is that both characters are connected to a murder, embrace guilt, and find the comfort of the most orthodox Christianity while suffering and nearly savoring their sentences. In suturing this honestly emotional war-experience novel to the traumatic-gothic mode, I would like to show how (1) this prison Brett Kincaid inhabits is a Gothic structure not unlike his own mind, (2) Corporal Kincaid and the Mayfield daughters are a trinity inhabiting a Gothic fairy tale—the darker, quieter, and non-conformist sister Cressie; the blonde, social Juliet; and the once handsome prince in uniform, returning to Carthage like the ugly raging wretch that is Dr. Frankenstein's neglected creature, (3) dead young women Brett Kincaid has affected return like wraiths, and (4) secret crimes and lingering guilt foment an return of the repressed, and hidden acts and crimes of omission operate in a fashion that produces phantasms, following long established traditions and structures within Gothic novels.

Joyce Carol Oates, from oral interviews regarding *Carthage*, seems to have learned most about prisons not from her native state or even the East Coast generally, but out west in California (as she taught half the year at Berkeley in the 2010s), especially from San Quentin State Prison. Appearing before inmates as a teacher in one of America's longest run and most developed prisoner-writing programs, she has mused for years about how people remember violent crime and the factors that led them to it. Much of her penetrating *Carthage* insight on living in prison may be informed by visiting inmate-classes and reading the work of prisoners at San Quentin State Prison. Granted, the Dannemora prison she envisions here is far different than San Quentin (and does not have the constant

interrogation, sexual tortures, and summary executions of Abu Ghraib which we will meditate upon later in this study). Dannemora is cold, Dannemora is not near beautiful San Francisco Bay, and Dannemora never had Johnny Cash stop by to record a concert/album (*At San Quentin*) and craft a song about it. Dannemora is a place to go and be forgotten. As a native New Yorker remembering this prison and as America's pre-eminent Gothic (this novel was her 40th since 1964), her imagination crafts a suitable Gothic hell out of Dannemora. Oates defines the grim structure of Dannemora through the blueprint-crafting vision of a Gothic architect. She will assemble its past and current features like building up so many Gothic bricks that we have seen before. And, like many Gothic-tainted structures where the past leaches out and pollutes the present and future, the encircling 60 foot walls surrounding Dannemora concentrate and continue its horrors, as in real life and in this fiction, it was in the nineteenth century the largest mental asylum of New York. Oates chronicles that "The prison was a place of madness. A malaise like a great toxic cloud had settled upon the weatherworn buildings" (Oates 2014). Oates furthers Derrida's insight, who is the most cultivated philosopher of death in this study, that mental distress and ghosts arise from incomplete or interrupted mourning (Derrida 1989a, b, 1993, 1995a, b, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006). Oates plaintively asks, "How many had died on this site, and their bodies buried in a forgotten graveyard somewhere outside the prison walls. Madness like spores blown out of the rich dark soil, into the grayish air" grew here, where "one had to struggle just to stay afloat and keep from drowning?" (Oates 2014, 403, 393). When we look at historical images of Dannemora from newspapers, we see traces of sprees of actual killer-inmates who tried to escape the awful place. Photographs of their dug tunnels are shown, woodpiles in the wilderness where they hid, car trunks and truck beds being searched by state troopers, houses they crept inside, and then (most times) their faces upon recapture—hungry, stunned, and despairing. It is not surprising that this desperate and desolate penal institution received its own HULU series in 2018, *Escape at Dannemora* with Benicio del Toro, Patricia Arquette, and Paul Dano. But inmate Kincaid is not one of those beautiful characters in a Hollywood streaming series. His bone structure is smashed from OIF, his eyes blighted, his charisma an absent thing. He is an unrefinedly and intensely ugly man in the height of misery now, and the biggest mystery is why he does not want to escape this place of the living dead, one that executed 41 killers in its history by electric chair (Gooley 2017).

One year into Kincaid's service in the military, by 2004, New York State abolished its death penalty, which comes as a sadness to the doomed Corporal once he is institutionalized. He feels he deserves all of its torments, and indeed fantasizes about the military-style rifle execution he dreamed the prison would give him. He admits "God did not think of man as a *case*. For a *case* is to be solved—and a man cannot be *solved*" (Oates 2014, 394). His "Little Siberia" with its walls that are accurately described as "the color of old, soiled bones" (392) is where one crosses over to be "imprisoned like a beast, and surrounded by beasts" (392). Corporal Kincaid is confined to isolation units, and he welcomes that. He has callers, and he refuses to speak to them. He gets letters on pastel stationery and perfume scented envelopes from women around the country demonstrating their sexual interest and attraction to him, what psychologists would call Hybristophilia, that compulsion to salvage and marry a doomed inmate—and like a dead man he declines to ever answer the women. Lawyers and defense funds come on appeal "and he seemed scarcely to care" (394). He hungers for punishment, resembling Raskolnikov's wish for the rather indifferent St. Petersburg police to finally accuse him, for a judge to convict, and for the punishment to blight him, to fit his crime. Even Arlette Mayfield, the mother of the woman Corporal Kincaid, is judged to have killed, tries repeatedly to visit him in person, saying he is still her son-in-law (though never wed to Juliet). Kincaid holds her off for as long as possible yet finally assents to a meeting with the now aged woman who still remembers him as a shining boy and not merely a lost killer convict.

The mystery, even to him, is his actual crime. The novel dares having its supposed murder or manslaughter victim narrate the prologue while searchers are casting about for her in the hot Nautauga State Forest Preserve of July (in real life a 300,000 acre wilderness), the place investigators suppose that her body was either buried or dumped into the Black Snake River and carried to Lake Ontario. In the Preserve, the closest thing Cressie's father Zeno Mayfield finds to evoke her is a young, freshly dead deer that he uncannily mistakes for his missing doe-eyed daughter. This rare structural gambit lets Oates pester readers with two possibilities for hundreds of pages before resolution: Is the supposed victim Cressida actually alive and on the run (and why would a young woman from an upper-middle class home of comfort and no obvious abuse and no lover dragging her off suddenly fake her death?). Or, second, do we have the testimony of a ghost about the futile ongoing search for her remains? Freud's insight

that “unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and they will come forth later in uglier ways” (2019, 171) follows the emotional contours of this novel in that her family both wants her back and also does not know how to live with her if she were back. Moreover, Freud’s insight corresponds to the “ghost” Cressida’s “monstrous” but forbidden desires for the beautiful soldier boy fiancé of her sister’s, made into a grotesque victim of fragging. These suppressed desires cannot be strangled, either, even when it seems she has been declared dead for six years and eight months. Cressida, who she was and what she wanted to be, this haunting of her by her second self, becomes in this novel like a vision of the “death of a beloved relative” as seen in a night dream by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* from 1900. Such visions are, the founder of psychoanalysis would opine like a Gothic writer himself, resembling “bygone, discarded, buried and repressed wishes, which we must nevertheless credit with a sort of continued existence, merely on account of their reappearance in a dream. They are not dead, like persons who have died, in the sense that we know death, but are rather like the shades in the *Odyssey* which awaken to a certain degree of life so soon as they have drunk blood” (2021, 77). It is little wonder that perceptive Anne Mellor in her *Art of Darkness* would write, then, that Freud’s works all “tacitly constitute a Gothic story; let’s call it *The Mysteries of Enlightenment*” (Williams 1995/2009). The wit Robert J. C. Young would dare further and see Freud’s landmark dream investigation not as psychology but a camouflaged Gothic novel itself, its analyzed dreams being connective tissue to storytelling of the dark and diseased kind: “the Gothic novel was the first kind of novel to construct its narrative around the revelation of secrets” just as dreams, in Freud’s book, were disguised wish fulfillments told in the manner of a secret to just one viewer, and what lay at their heart was “the mystery of feminine sexuality ... Terror at the prospect of being engulfed by the abyssal chasm” (Young 1999, 220, 229). Cressida’s desire for acceptance, for her unconventional beauty and her weirdness and her lack of discipline failures and socially awkward ways, her sense that Kincaid is a “freak” as she is, leads to this attempted seduction of her sister’s fiancé, her wanting to lose her virginity to him in a wilderness one night just past the Wolf’s Head Bar. For his part, it is true that Corporal Kincaid, after either witnessing all of or hearing part of the sexual-killing of an Iraqi teenager and the carving of her face into a Joker’s smile by his military squad, now sees women as if they are the edge of a chasm, the chasm itself, and a quick push into it. The Iraqi girl ravaged by his fellow troops months before resembles Cressida

just enough, especially in youth and innocence and physical darkness. When Cressie touches him when they are alone in Nautauga State Forest Preserve, as he is trying to drive her home from a bar late at night where she had her first beer and became uninhibited and sensually emboldened, she becomes that Freudian chasm in his shattered mind. He cries out in the dark forest: “DON’T WANT you get away you disgust me” (Oates 2014, 292), and pushes her away, whereupon she pushes back and his PTSD overreaction triggers, leading him to push with a few too many pounds per square inch. Her head quickly smacks head against the windshield and her body falls out of his jeep and onto a juttied dirt road in Preserve, and then for several chapters no more information on her state is found. All we know is that Kincaid remembers trying to bury a girl: this burial motif has a daunting recurrence in the book, a repetition dimension summoning in its dread the best of Poe’s tales of the uncanny—something is where it should not be or *vice versa*—as well as the universal taboo of touching the dead, those surrounding them, and anything associated with them such as “The Premature Burial” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Kincaid is accosted by dreams and visions of burying a girl, but not well enough: she comes back out of the grave. Oates reminds us of this central dread that primitive societies had that we still share, that “Of earthly creatures only Homo sapiens and elephants buried their dead. Out of anguish, and out of respect. And out of a wish that the dead remain *dead*” (Oates 142). Her raising this point echoes research on the practical use of tombstones besides showing our reverence and marking the dates of the beloved: it is to keep them *in the ground* (Barber 1988). Kincaid seems sure he has buried an Iraqi girl and placed a cross for her in the dust; he is sure he has clawed with his own hands a pit for Cressie’s body, too. But are either still there? His mind torments him with uncertainty. Did he bury them at all? Worse, is he so incoherent, did he bury them alive? Or did they come back from the dead? And without a reliable witness to the acts of this man suffering PTSD, our minds cannot confirm what he has done. She and the Iraqi girl whose death will plague Corporal Kincaid—can both be seen as entombed before their time, one in a New York state forest and one in an eastern Iraqi desert.

Cressida’s life, until her disappearance, was one of an informal disappearance: a constant hiding in her room from her family. She was the odd girl with an unexpressed, forlorn emotion, feeling unloved by her family, a reaction that came out in their eyes as contempt for their petit bourgeois ways.

In running from her family and from her freshman year failures at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, teenage Cressida is also running and colliding into another's trauma (and causing a trauma for her sister by letting her sister's fiancé be named a murder suspect, and for her whole family to believe they have lost her forever in the vast Nautauga State Forest Preserve). Often in literature, the scraping against another's unhealed wound also creates a fascination with twinning and doppelgängers, as if the past is being replayed with old souls for new bodies. Thus in some ways, Cressida becomes the Iraqi murdered girl, and Kincaid must push her advances away to avoid being consumed by what he considers the ghost of the evil past of his second tour in Iraq. Oates masterfully mixes his past with his present: a zig-zag through time patterns itself through the whole novel. The narrative winds along as a traumatized mind may, snagging on bits of today that unfurl the gang rape of past days:

JESUS! WHAT THEY'D DONE.

What they'd done *was*.

Held her down. Jammed a rag into her screaming mouth.

Taking turns with her. Grunting, yelping like dogs.

Then afterward one of them sliced her face.

Sliced halfway up her face on both sides. Corners of her mouth he'd sawed-at with a Swiss Army knife.

So she was grinning. Like a crazy clown.

And her eyes open, staring. (Oates 2014, 130)

This is the one flashback that is replayed often in Kincaid. And when the shocked Kincaid, as if still in the Land of the Dead that was Iraq, hears his Carthage Police Department interrogators years later ask him about how he killed Cressida and where he left the body, all he can think of is the mutilation and sexual violence played upon an Iraqi girl. Her family lived dangerously close to a checkpoint manned by his fellow American soldiers. Perhaps he admits he killed Cressida because he wants the detectives to stop talking. Perhaps he admits he killed Cressida because he wants to be punished for an earlier crime in the desert (that was not his to be fully culpable for). There is no indication that Kincaid took part in the sexual butchery in Iraq (of the girl and entire family), but he was not able to stop it. Pathos is delivered when we see him try to make a grave for Cressida of "rocks, pebbles, clumps of mud" yet also throwing rocks "onto her until she was still" (155), along with a cross, just as he made a grave covering for the nameless Iraqi girl,

when he “dragged her about one hundred feet from the edge of the village road and tried to bury her beneath mud-chunks and rocks and slats of a broken fence” (135). Trauma’s classic symptom of re-enactment is always part of Kincaid’s behavior Stateside: “Seeing” enemies and trying to smash them, “witnessing” the dead and trying to bury them. His is a case looking for atonement; he has not only survivor-guilt but survivor-negligence. It is often wondered why the innocent confess to crimes they did not commit, as Kincaid does in the novel. A neglected cause to explain this phenomenon is that the suspect feels guilty for other acts that he or she was never held to account over, and I would argue that explains Kincaid’s passive acceptance of the interrogator’s leading and loaded questions that implicate him: “They were asking What had he done to her. . . . If you were provoked. If you confess now, and lead us to her” (130). There is a place where victimhood is spotlighted in this novel: Kincaid is victim, signing up for a war that will leave him crippled and scarred and mentally defeated, and hated by his fellow soldiers for not covering up military outrages against a child. Even his mother will call him a fool, too gullible to see how he will be ground up by those who bellow about the justness of the war—at the same time their stock portfolios fatten, as Pentagon-supplier corporations rapidly outperformed stocks on Nasdaq, S & P 500, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average during the OIF and OEF by an average of 58 percent (Schwarz 2021). Kept in a delusory state by his brain injuries and his self-hatred, Kincaid can only wallow in guilt. His greatest pain now is that no firing squad is waiting for him at Dannemora. He wants to die with honor, standing up, as he was commanded a soldier should do. Instead, he gets stuck in solitary confinement, and his one attempt to be of some use, to redeem himself in the slightest degree is to defend prisoners he sees violated on his rare forays out of solitary imprisonment. The painful irony is that when it is finally proven that Cressida is alive and Kincaid committed no crime against her, he cannot be freed. He is being kept now at Dannemora because, in his aid to the weak of that prison, he attacked physically the strong, including other inmates and some equally sadistic guards, so his sentence is lengthened. On the other hand, Kincaid in some ways welcomes how his incarceration (though initially he preferred a death sentence) relieves him of some of the regrets, constant reminders of the past, potential bumping into the Mayfield family, and open schedule and search for post-military career that the free world in Carthage represents. Thus, Dannemora cannot be reckoned simply an evil place as Abu Ghraib might be (the prison near Baghdad designed and built by the West for Saddam Hussein while still an ally, and whose name in Arabic translates to “The Place of the Raven”). Kincaid finds some personal

and religious discoveries and degree of freedom in his deep inward retreats there, akin to those Fyodor Dostoyevsky describes in *Crime and Punishment* and novels beyond it (like, for example, *The Brothers Karamazov* where Father Zosima finds “obedience, fasting, and prayer are laughed at, yet only through them lies the way to real true freedom,” as well as his *The House of the Dead* where we find in Russia as in America, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons” [Dostoyevsky 2016]). Kincaid’s exposure to and questions from a Dannemora chaplain, Father Kranach, who authentically cares for him and his growth, give Kincaid some solace and some acceptance of his place and his identity, diminishing his longing for death. It is true that elsewhere in essays and interviews, Oates share undeniable problems and histories of abuse within organized religions. In *Playboy*, she mused, “I’m not a person who feels very friendly toward organized religion. I think people have been brainwashed through the centuries. The churches, particularly the Catholic Church, are patriarchal organizations that have been invested with power for the sake of the people in power, who happen to be men. It breeds corruption. I found going to church every Sunday and on holy days an exercise in extreme boredom” (1993). This understandably skeptical position toward them is an admittance that they have not formed any welcomed part of her spirituality. Yet, the spiritual Father in this novel and organized Christianity does seem to be one of the few helps in the whole novel for convict Kincaid, so we have to admit a flexibility in her appraisal of organized religion not voiced elsewhere. Though resolutely wary of houses of worship herself, she sees that one (the prison version of such a temple) and its minister could still be the only one helping a person not want to kill himself all the time. Indeed, Kincaid becomes like the thief on the cross at Calvary who discovers something in the other mysterious crucified figure far different than he knew before, and the novel even refers to the church at the Dannemora by that thief’s supposed name, Saint Dismas, known through legend if not through New Testament texts, as the crucified criminal who would recognize the Messiah. This finding of some measure of peace while incarcerated is difficult but not impossible. From four tours that I have escorted my students to of the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas (the state’s oldest prison with a population centered on hardened gang members convicted of homicide, kidnappers, and sex offenders—the prison that administers all death penalties for the state), I have visited with some inmates who seem suicidal with their heads in their hands and close to weeping, as well as others who prefer the place to the unregulated outside world. One inmate in the Huntsville prison chapel (just across the library that was the site of the longest prison

siege involving civilians in United States history in July to August 1974 [Willett 2005]) unforgettably and mysteriously told me with an illegal smile, “It’s a *good place* to live, too.” In *Carthage*, Cressie also takes a fateful prison tour (in Florida) that awakens her traumatic memory of New York. Almost seven years after the incident at Nautauga that caused her to vanish from her family, the vault of her repressed memories suddenly cracks open. She sees the convicts wasting way in the present and remembers that her running away from a New York state preserve implicated Kincaid, the last man she was sighted with, for her implied murder.

FRANKENSTEIN’S CREATURE

Causing the widest harm in the community, yet self-considered as its principal victim is not Brett Kincaid, but Cressida Mayfield. She assists in destroying her sister’s wedding plans, stages a disappearance which exacerbates tensions with her parents and leads to their divorce, and helps send Kincaid to a sentence for manslaughter as he is considered the agent of her vanishing. One of the great questions of the novel is what does Cressida want? She seems as lost and indecipherable as the Escher-like drawings she perpetually drew in high school and showed off one night in her bedroom, inappropriately to Brett Kincaid, leading him away from the rest of the family and up the stairs from the dining table. In watching how she sees characters through a Gothic lens, we can track some of her mind’s movements, and the Gothic character she seems to study and write on most is Frankenstein’s creation. She spends much of her time as a freshman at a local university devoted to her “Romantics & Revolutionaries” course, and soon “Frankenstein entered Cressida’s dreams” (Oates 2014, 369). She hatches a 76-page project which includes drawings alongside the text, instead of a standard research paper. The professor finds it remarkable A+ work better than any senior thesis in a long time, but as he tells her on campus, he must discount it as a D as it was nine days late. She runs from his office at this news, hoping to throw herself in the nearby rushing St. Lawrence river. Her thesis had been, solidly enough, that “mankind is destined to create monsters that, once created, turn against their creators” involving it with the “federal government’s ‘crusade against terror’” (371), complete with “brilliant line-drawings of the ‘monster’ as a boy-soldier who becomes a ‘military strategist’” (372). The young woman who always felt she had no existence—that all her life she “was just a reflecting surface”—nearly chooses the route of mythology’s Narcissus to die. But before doing so, while the country is still in some patriotic fervor and blindness toward its Middle Eastern wars, she does

intuit that “the wars were monstrous, and made monsters of those who waged them. The Iraq War, the Afghanistan War. In time, civilians too would become monstrous, for this is the nature of war. Even before Brett Kincaid had returned from Iraq disfigured, she knew this” (368). At this point, at the cliff’s edge over the St. Lawrence, she sees the doppelgänger of Kincaid. He is staying her from killing herself. Soon she sees him in a Port Authority bus terminal, asking to sit beside her, another doppelgänger, her “secret friend” (377), her Frankenstein creation: it seems to be Kincaid impossibly there again. Like the so-called monster, Cressida felt it was “better to have never been born,” but his ghostly image still prevents her from killing herself.

Frankenstein’s monster may be one of the most traumatized icons of Gothic literary history, brought to literary life by his teenaged creator just as teenaged Cressie bears her *Frankenstein Project* with its hand-drawn images of an “uncannily human-looking figure in a military uniform” (Oates 371). Twitching and full of threat and pathos, Mary Shelley’s ultimate outsider, he is abandoned by his creator and as Bruce Wyse captures it succinctly, “spurned, abominated, and demonized at every turn, [becoming] a case study in the debilitating effects of a deprivation of sympathy” (Wyse 2018, 75). Indeed, Mary Shelley famously shows how the creature’s outside image matters all for everyone but the blind: the seeing only hate and attack when they spy his “unearthly ugliness” (Shelley 2017, 135) or run and shriek when they witness his “appalling hideousness” (273). Luis Othoniel Rosa, in impressively applying the perceptions of Freud, Levinas, and Derrida to this novel, goes a step further by naming the creature a trauma in its own right: “We could think of the monster as a large wound, where the idea of subjectivity and identity is in crisis, since nothing is actually his” (Rosa 2011, 471). Nothing is Corporal Kincaid’s either, but blame and contempt and self-hatred. Made from the parts of executed criminals and the cast-off organs at abattoirs, all from creatures suffering the most fatally traumatic injuries imaginable, Frankenstein’s creature is rejected from the first stirrings of life, the twitch and opening of his yellowed eyes. Like the creature, for a long time Kincaid cannot even say what he is: human, beast, or some hybrid out of another Science Fiction/Action-Adventure/Gothic, H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. That doctor is a man who is himself, in Cressie’s mind, “a debased type of Dr. Frankenstein” (Oates 370). Kincaid is called by many “ugly,” just as another self-identifying monster (of crime and alienation) in the book, Cressida, describes herself as “*Ugly, ugly ugly girl you don’t deserve to live*” (292). We remember that ugly comes from the Old Norse “ugga” and

“uggligr,” a verb and adjective meaning respectively, to dread and to be dreaded. So dreadful he is because like all “monsters” whose Latin root means “to show, to demonstrate, to act as an omen,” he is an indicator of a dead yet living presence (Oates calls him “a gray ghost figure”) and a witness of the crimes from the GWOT (370). He is the shape and shade of things to come. Hundreds of thousands of men and women suffering PTSD issues from their traumatic experiences, reliving traumas perhaps this very moment, are like him. If Brett Kincaid is alive in death, then his winding sheet is this novel’s *Frankenstein* plot skin, though the book twists and ruptures its sutures and stitches at times. In Shelley’s version, the embattled Creature has no mother; Kincaid does, and “She was trembling with indignation even when no one stared at them” (Oates 163). Walking in a mall or on a sidewalk in Carthage, Mother Ethel Kincaid might just blurt

What are you looking at, you?—take a good look. Know who this is?—a wounded veteran of the Iraq War. Sacrificed himself for you—now look at him! What’s the matter—can’t face us? Asshole! Once, Ethel gave a little rush in the direction of several young teenagers who were gaping at her and her tall lanky son who looked fitted-together out of mismatched parts, hissing—Get away! Go to hell! Think your turn won’t come—it will! (Oates 163)

The mother of the human monster, like the mother of Grendel, has loosed her curse. Rough, uncouth, and salty, still Ethel is moving because she hearkens to an archetypal revenge figure in literature: she will be seeking those who destroyed her son, abroad and at home (she has lawsuits pending).

But with the irony that is steadfast in much world literature, it is the one who loves him romantically who most helps to make him a monster in his hometown’s eyes. Cressie runs from him in the Preserve, but does not return to her family for six years and eight months. In the interim, it is not until she visits on a university researcher’s tour of the death row in a Florida prison called Orion that she has a traumatic breakdown and is invaded by intrusive thoughts and memories of how she has framed the Corporal. In all this time, we have no proof that she has either brooded upon or acted on her fear that Kincaid might be accused, found guilty, and imprisoned for her disappearance and be so mentally damaged, guilt-laden, and incoherent that he would not contest it. A bit like Dr. Victor Frankenstein herself, who sat in a courtroom as his servant Justine was tried before a hanging judge for murdering his little brother William for a

piece of jewelry, when he knows well that it was his own monster that killed the boy, Cressida has committed the crime of omission. How could one who writes so brilliantly on Dr. Frankenstein as Cressie has end up re-enacting one of the Doctor's most knavish crimes? What kind of coward is Cressie?

In true coincidence-laden Gothic style, the morning after her fight with Kincaid, it is Cressida Mayfield who is picked up by another Iraqi War veteran on an old asphalt road just outside the Nautauga Preserve, a fair distance from where searchers will try to find her body. A sergeant in the New York State National Guard named Haley McSwain comes to Cressie's aid, a woman whose own little sister has died in a drunk-driver collision and whom Cressida becomes the doppelgänger replacement for. Scratched, bleeding, bitten, gut-sick, unable to speak with her grotesque swollen mouth, and laying in the dirt and thorns of the ditch, Cressie looks more than half-dead. But Haley considers this girl a deliverance. Curiously, as Haley is looking at Cressie in the dirt she speaks in a ten-line dialogue to a secret sharer that none in the book will ever see. Cressida said the second person makes no reply, but yet the conversation seems too animated for it to be simply Haley's self-mutterings. We hear Haley's lines roared: "Like hell I'm gonna deliver this to the hands of the enemy! No fuckin' way" (305). One explanation is that the listener is the ghost of her sister killed on the road, a girl named Sabbath McSwain, in attendance of the deliverance of Cressida, and she is reborn to this life. When Cressida rises from the ground, she will no longer be called Cressida for many chapters: she is Sabbath, and she carries a dead girl's driver's license now and high school ID with a birthdate close to the same, and an identifying photograph on both eerily similar to her own visage, another Gothic coincidence. Collisions with others' traumas often indicate a fascination with alternate histories, twins, and doppelgängers. In another New York novelist I discussed in an earlier book on 9/11, Sharon Lynne Schwartz and her *Writing on the Wall*, a teenage girl wandering confused on Manhattan streets just after 9/11 resembles the niece the protagonist lost track of while babysitting in a park years before. The same desperate pattern happens: the rescuer knows that the legal requirement is for her to report this found missing minor and reunite the girl with family, and yet the sense this doppelgänger foundling is the actual missing relative is too intense to resist, though all the facts stand in the way of it. The rescuer enfolds her, and the girl is kept (for far too long) in the protagonist's home, all in a fantasy effort to reclaim family.

This modern Gothic vision of opening terrifying vistas of profitable and endless wars, and the cycles of trauma that follow them, as well the searches for the lost ones who are either dead or uncanny to us now, has become our everyday reality in America. This view of our post-traumatic world after 9/11 is consonant with the interpretations of Slavoj Žižek. Benjamin Noys argues well, for example, that “for Žižek it is the science of psychoanalysis that pieces together our ‘dissociated knowledge’ into the truth that threatens us with madness: the kernel of reality is the horror of the real. We flee from this insight into the ‘dark age’ of the ‘minimum of dealization’ that allows us to bear this horror” (Noys 2010). I believe the kernel of darkest reality is invested in Kincaid himself. The reality is that American tax money has trained soldiers, created a vast system of logistical support for each soldier, sent them half way across the world to Afghanistan or Iraq, paid the salaries of politicians who speak of the plan for the war and generals who insist the efforts at clearing and controlling stretches of Afghanistan or Iraq can work, rebuilt the country, and more. Yet with two trillion dollars spent by the United States over 20 years on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom combined, the truth is still that these soldier mates of Kincaid’s chose to abduct, rape, kill, and mutilate an Iraqi girl rather than protect civilians. Full knowledge of this—of all the training, resources, dollars, and sacrifices made—just so that men could rape, murder, and desecrate is impossibly depressing. Kincaid is like a Frankenstein creature that acts to embody a glimpse of the horrible, but not the whole of it. Kincaid has become the Other, the figure that does not fit into the Order. He is not the horror of the Real exactly but a screen that covers it. The horror may be that for all best American intentions, those places where Amerians invade turn to death, ash, and intensified tribalism, becoming more entangled and engaged in war than when the U.S. arrived. The rise of tribalism, and the ascent of strongmen around the world, and the fall of democracies and their influence only have been more marked since 2001. The Iraqi girl’s rape, we shall see, appears modeled on a real case, but she is also a symbol for all the sexual violence and murder and mutilation done in America’s name elsewhere, too. There is a hole that opens up even within Kincaid at times, and it is the one that Carthage citizens use his body to cover. The Real is unbearable, and the only lesson of American invasions and occupations ever learned is that nothing is ever learned and remembered from American invasions and occupations. Kincaid functions much like critic Ghiasuddin Alizadeh sees Frankenstein’s monster: “unlike the dominant critical legacy which has always viewed the monster as the ultimate

catastrophe, as the main source of horror in the world of the novel, the monster, in my view, conceals a horror more horrible than himself, namely, the horror of the Real" (Alizadeh 2018, 203). Alizadeh goes further to suggest what the monster is screening, which is helpful to understand the GWOT's effect on the American social fabric from these unpopular wars and the cognitive dissonance between the American government's insistence that some progress is being made on the warfronts every year, and then the collapse of the Afghanistan national defense and police agencies within weeks of the American exit under President Joe Biden, along with a string of the American-trained Iraqi army disasters, including retreats and desertions and losses of millions of dollars of armaments. Alizadeh claims that "From a Žižekian perspective, the monster is not the representation of the Real, but a phantasmic object the very being of which functions to cover the void of the Real, namely, the impossibility of a consistent and unified society" (208). The problem here is that the void seems too big for all our monsters to cover: all the testimony and photographs of abuse by our soldiers' own hands will not be blacked out.

It has been convincingly argued that rape and murder are among the five dominant fears in any Gothic novel or film. Wendy Fall, Christine Froula, Jannea Thomason, and Coskun Liktör have all thoroughly and eloquently made this case from Gothic's origin until now. And that same grim fear of entrapment, sexual violence, killing, and dumping of one's body pulses through the veins of *Carthage*, too, like poison. But what is this novel's tie of rape with its fixation on the phantasmal, the doppelgänger, the monstrous, and other haunted forms and figures? And what does this fixation reveal about what a nation hides, the violent pasted-over cracks in civilization, our post-terror trauma, secret longings, manifest guilt, mirroring, facing or not facing our transgressions, confessions false and true, and spectral hauntings? How does the crime and cover-up itself in Iraq become a ghost? The American soldiers in real life may have torn off the Iraqi girl's clothes, hit, penetrated, and killed her, but the victim's body will silently speak, and it will unmask their denials. While teenager Abeer al-Janabi's identity as Oates' inspiration has not been proposed before, I would argue that her true-life murder reveals the soldiers' heart of darkness in this novel. On March 12, 2006, in a planned, whisky-fueled attack to "go out and kill some Iraqis" (qtd. in Smith 2006), four soldiers of the Bravo Company of the United States' 502nd Infantry Regiment abducted, raped, and murdered a 14-year-old girl named Abeer al-Janabi inside her home, after first murdering her parents and her

six-year-old sister in the same residence. It turns out that the soldiers had been harassing the girl at checkpoints they manned for some time, saying salacious things about Abeer to her mother, and spying on her as she tended her family's garden which was around 200 meters away from the checkpoints where these soldiers were supposed to carrying out professional duties. Trying to outmaneuver them, Abeer plead with her family before to be able to stay and sleep at a different house because she feared the stalking soldiers (*United States v. Steven D. Green* 2006). Not long after, Specialist Paul E. Cortez, Specialist James P. Barker, Private First Class Jesse V. Spielman, and Private First Class Steven D. Green committed their shocking crimes against her and her family (2006). Abeer's brothers who were at school came home to find the bodies, which these American troops initially blamed on Al Qaeda insurgents (2006). This despicable case would cause a political-military schism and disaster for the United States in Iraq, as it would for America's standing before the rest of the world. (We recall it was preceded by the 2004 exposures of hushed-up accounts of U.S military personnel and contractors sexually abusing and even impregnating Iraqi females from age 6 to 70 in Abu Ghraib during 2003 [*Standard Operating Procedure* 2008].) Insurgents in media claimed the rise in their attacks against American soldiers and contractors, along with bombings throughout Iraq, was vengeance for the depraved American attack on vulnerable Abeer and her family—often simply called in media “the Mahmudiyah rape and killings,” based on its location. This military crime is in some ways similar in its leakage of details to the My Lai massacre from the Vietnam War, which caused a tailspin in public approval for that war, and where (again) a number of brave whistleblower-soldiers were necessary for the public to ever know the truth. In the My Lai case, one of the whistleblowers, a soldier who heard details of the massacre, contacted a U.S. congressperson. (My Lai had been covered-up originally by military administration, even though senior American military officials in South Vietnam, including battalion staff officer Colin Powell, were put on notice of it by a U.S. helicopter pilot witness). In the case of the Iraq rape and killings, Private First Class Justin Watt reported the events he had overheard (from a sixth soldier, Sergeant Anthony W. Yribe, who stayed at the 502's checkpoint that night and knew the crime his fellow soldiers committed) to his mental health counselor, not trusting the military chain of command to act on it. The mental health counselor would reveal the violence to military investigators. Army Lt. General Bernard Champoux would later admit that Watt would hear “of

possible threats [to himself] by another member of his (original) unit” for snitching on the killer (Zoroya 2006). This is modeled in *Carthage*, where Kincaid confesses his squad did this rape, torture, “Joker face” mutilation, and murder to the Company’s chaplain, and later finds himself being warned by his own army squad that he will be fragged. Not long after he is seriously wounded, and in *Frankenstein* style we find, “He’d died and gone to that place. ... Still, they’d shoveled and swept the parts of him together. Ingeniously stitched and glued and inserted wires to hold him together. ... Call this self some convenient name. ... *Corporal Brett Graham Kincaid Property U.S. Army*” (Oates 148–149). Now Kincaid is a kind of GWOT android—intraocular lens in a mashed eye, a chunk of titanium patching his cracked skull, facial skin stretched drum-like tight, and wires throughout his lower body with “a cath-EEE-ter stuck up inside his limp-rubber cock to drain the poison piss” (149). Corporal Brett Kincaid’s fellow soldiers form a clique of deceitful Gothic evildoers in the novel, which sadly echo some actual incidents of war crime during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Sworn to defend and protect the lives of the civilians surrounding them (Fig. 4.1), basking in the early approval of their families and hometowns back in the States when they were sent off to quash Saddam Hussain and build a democratic Iraq, these army soldiers (none of them are female) nevertheless are as wicked as any Gothic sadist. They are jaded, bored, and often drunk: they are desensitized to the point that they have to do increasingly violent acts to feel anything. While it is true that they suffer losses at the hands of shadowy insurgents, still they have time to leave their posts and spy on children and invade homes of innocent people simply trying to exist in the battleground that is Iraq. What is more, they always have the rifles and grenades and air support: they have authority to call in air strikes against someone’s home that they could report as harboring terrorists, they have night vision goggles that permit them to wander when the shadows lengthen, and they have authority on their side when they kick in doors to innocent people’s dwellings. What happens when there is no defender on the corner to stop them? It is *The Heart of Darkness* for a new century. They rule over the land near their check points like some tin pot Gothic despot taking what they want and covering up their crime by sometimes killing people with foreign weapons they find, like AK-47s. If any of these soldiers should choose to break and enter a residence in the middle of the night to ease their restlessness and satiate their sadism for a time, who is there to stop them? Who is there to believe anyone’s complaint against the U.S. soldiers? How close did these



Fig. 4.1 Air Assault mission in Mahmudiyah, Iraq. This village in Iraq is where in real-life U.S. soldiers once covered-up their rape and murder of a girl (and much of her family) and blamed it on insurgents. A similar case to this historical one inspires much of the conflict of Carthage or Corporal Brent Kincaid’s time in the “Land of the Dead”. (Photo: PDUSG)

soldiers come to forever covering up their sickening crimes against an innocent family in Mahmudiyah? And how many more unreported Mahmudiyahs (Fig. 4.2) are there, where either the decent person who chose to report it was killed by a plot of friendly fire (perhaps disguised as an insurgent’s attack) or who simply never found the courage to be moral enough to blow the whistle?

In all the works surveyed here, Oates’ band of real-life modeled Gothic villains are arguably the most evil: they are people who did not amount to much before their rape and killing spree, but somehow regressed further in the deserts of Iraq, their true and vicious nature finally revealing itself at last with their rape of children, disregard for humanity, and careless killing that was so powerfully captured regarding the Vietnam era with non-documentary films like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* as well as *Heaven and Earth* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. Perhaps *Redacted* (written and directed by Brian De Palma



Fig. 4.2 U.S. Army enquiring about enemy activity in Mahmudiyah. (Photo: PDUSG)

and released in 2007) comes closest to capturing the cruelty against children and the astonishment of Corporal Kincaid in the Land of the Dead.

To appreciate Oates' bravura novel fully is to look more closely at the historical record of the rape and murder by U.S. soldiers in Iraq which most closely resembles the case at the center of her book. The court record suggests that the instigator of the attack on the al-Janabi family was an army soldier born in Midland, Texas, Private First Class Steven D. Green (Fig. 4.3). He was described by a journalist who met him before the murders as much like the troops surrounding him at his Mahmudiyah base: "young (and immature) small-town kids who sign up for a job as killers, lured by some gut-level desire for excitement and adventure, ... who shared a dark sense of humor and were clearly desensitized to death" (Tilghman 2006). A fellow Texan named Andrew Tilghman came to the 21-year-old Green's base camp 20 miles south of Baghdad's protected Green Zone and interviewed Green and his fellow soldiers for *The Washington Post*. Green's candor—just three weeks before he and his fellow soldiers would rape and murder Abeer, killing and burning (with his



Fig. 4.3 U.S. Army Private First Class Steven Dale Green, found guilty and sentenced for a rape and murders in Mahmudiyah. Here, the late Private blasts the lock off a supposedly deserted Iraqi home (December 2005). (Photo: PDUSG)

squad) whatever family they could find of hers—is disarming and telling. Green feels comfortable with admitting it. It shows that despite whatever reforms in recruitment and training that have been made, Frankenstein creatures (just as Cressie imagined and drew in her freshman project) stumble with breath stinking of alcohol and wreak havoc in the U.S. Army:

I came over here because I wanted to kill people. The truth is, it wasn't all I thought it was cracked up to be. I mean, I thought killing somebody would be this life-changing experience. And then I did it, and I was like, "All right, whatever." I shot a guy who wouldn't stop when we were out at a traffic checkpoint and it was like nothing. Over here, killing people is like squashing an ant. I mean, you kill somebody and it's like "All right, let's go get some pizza." (qtd. in Tilghman 2006)

As with Charlie Company at My Lai in 1968, it is true that Green's unit was under the stress of near constant violence (Fig. 4.4) which made even their commander suffer a new mental collapse. Routinely, for their platoon, roadside bombs exploded, mortar shells fell, masses of artillery rounds secreted beneath garbage piles waited, and one of their soldiers was killed per week. Green's view of the war he volunteered for after his four months of service becomes absolutely fatalistic: "I gotta be here for a year and there ain't [expletive] I can do about it. I just want to go home alive. I don't give a [expletive] about the whole Iraq thing. See, this war is different from all the ones that our fathers and grandfathers fought. Those wars were for something. This war is for nothing" (2006). When finally faced by the FBI at his home and presented charges, Steven's mysterious words were, "You must think I'm a monster" (qtd. in Alsup 2009). Steven Dale Green, convicted to life without parole in 2009, hanged himself in an Arizona federal prison in 2014 (BBC 2014). No note was left.



Fig. 4.4 Enemy munitions intended to kill Iraqi and U.S. troops stationed in Mahmudiyah. (Photo: PDUSG)

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PART III

Comics



Rick Veitch and Gary Erskine's *Army@LOVE* (2007–2009): Recruitment, Orgies, & Hairy Monsters

Articulating in ways that the novel, short story, poem, drama, film, TV series, or video game do not, graphic novels have compelling advantages in Gothic War on Terror (GWOT) storytelling. For one, comics have gutters between their panes where time, either long or very short, must pass. This fourth dimension of comics is much interpreted by its makers and critics, from Hillary L. Chute (2010, 2016, 2017), Scott McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006), Harriet E. H. Earle (2017, 2020), Art Spiegelman (2008), to Tatiana Prorokova and Nimrod Tal (2018). In those blank spaces between lines of each of the frames, our imagination supplies some images, reactions shots, plot developments, sounds or missing speech, and realizations. It happens so quickly that we seldom muse on it, but we are co-creator for every comic we encounter. What we supply in that blank chunk of time that is a gutter on a comic page reveals how involved and astutely interpretive we are up to that point, and we should explore this with the GWOT comics I raise. McCloud calls the gutter—and our way of “mentally construct[ing] a continuous, unified reality” from it (1993: 67)—the central enigma “at the very heart of comics” (66). Every comic book, then, is something we participate in: this is art “aided and abetted by a silent accomplice” in determining time and motion and decisions made in that missing moment (68), namely us. McCloud further ventures that this imaginative finishing of what happens in that gap or gutter—called “closure”—is “an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret

contract between creator and audience” (60). Readers around the world may be putting an infinite variety of things into those openings or gutters. The question becomes what are individual readers right now adding to these GWOT graphic novels?

As we open a comic book, unlike the other media, we see two pages of images, perhaps ten or more panels. The fact that we are seeing the present time at the top left but also glimpsing the future at the far right bottom as we turn each page means that we are abiding in two temporalities simultaneously. In a sense, comics always disclose so much with a casual turn of the page that other storytelling forms can hide or hold back from us for a long while, so the mind responds to comics differently, perhaps with more control. The reader is more of a true clairvoyant than in any other entertainment form, and this gives the reader power, perhaps leaving her or him less often lost than in other media. Moreover, after the page is viewed, then time present, time past, and time future all become one as our eyes instantly zigzag from final panel on the page, back to the first panel on page, and back to the final one again. We move back and forth in time like a river-glider floating on the glassy surface of temporality. This darting act, like hopping from one river stone to another to the bank and then back again without error or confusion, is impossible to do with a novel: no matter how rebellious the reader, one cannot satisfyingly read backward, but one can view images backward and keep re-evaluating the meanings of our experience from that page.

Prevalent in the GWOT comics is a technique that Japanese cartoonists have been executing in non-combat comics since the 1960s (consider *Speedracer* as an example). War comics, to accentuate the action and delicate balance between life and sudden death that the characters engage in, let us become the object in everyone’s central view: a bomb, a Humvee, an Abrams tank, a rocket launched grenade, or any object of death you can imagine. McCloud calls such a technique to be employing *subjective motion*, and “starting in the mid-eighties, a few American artists began to adopt [this] effect in their own work, until the [in] early Nineties it [became] fairly common” (1993, 114).

Another art the GWOT comics will display is making emotions visible—particularly anger, panic, tension, anxiety, pride, lust, desperation, depression, loneliness, self-hatred, vengefulness, guilt, surprise, and shock. Such varied feelings manifest through mere lines and color and shading. But it is a mistake to call them “mere lines,” as these artists use them as an Expressionist painter may, expressing states of mind not unlike artists of

the canvas. Contemplate, for example, Edvard Munch (*The Scream* from 1893, *Madonna* from 1895, *The Voice* of 1893, or *Vampire* from 1895), Vincent Van Gogh (any number of self-portraits), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (*Franzi in front of Carved Chair* from 1910), Franz Marc (consider *Yellow Cow* of 1911), Gabriele Münter (*School House of Murnau* from 1908), Wassily Kandinsky (*Garden of Love II* from 1916), and Paul Klee (*Presentation du Miracle* from 1916), Käthe Kollwitz (*The Sacrifice* from 1923), Otto Dix (*Metropolis* from 1928), or Emil Nolde (*Akte, zwei Frauen blass* of 1938). The shape of the Expressionists' lines, the power of their colors, and thick texture of the paint on their canvases shocked the world and gave us the new. Wassily Kandinsky outlined his own color theory in 1912, which could be profitably applied to our own GWOT comics, from reds that are angry, to blues of peace, to greens that are cool, to lines that are hushed, and to shapes that are noisy.

Much visually in the nature of comics—especially their heavy use of the close-up shot and their graphic rendering of subjects sexual or warlike—seems big, overdrawn, and sometimes exploding right in our faces, much like the cinema of combat. One such comic shows a soldier mate blown apart, and then a U.S. marine named Vince echoes how this shredding of a comrade—vividly rendered in the graphic novel *Walking Wounded* (2015 in English, originally published in France as *Revenants* in 2013, by the native French/naturalized American writer Olivier Morel)—becomes the experience of many of these GWOT comics. “When my buddy Cook died in an explosion from an IED,” the character Vince reflects in a cartoon balloon, “I started asking myself questions. We were creating the insurrection we were supposed to be stopping. Instead of liberating Iraq, we’d brutally invaded it and stirred up such hatred” (Oliver Morel and Mael/Martin Leclerc 2015: 79).

Such tragic unintentional consequences, such inciting of greater sectarian insurrection by the presence of American troops, also happens over the 18 separate issues of *Army@LOVE*, set in “Afbaghistan” and the “Outer Mongrolian Republic” in the 2000s. Its creative team Rick Veitch (writer) and Gary Erskine (artist) with colorists Jose Villarrubia and Brian Miller seem to take the stylistic cues from *Our Army at War* comics series (from 1952 to 1977). That series featured World War II veteran Sgt. Rock who fought in the high-action American infantry—a branch which we will also see writer Frank Marraffino and artist Henry Flint set their five issues of *Haunted Tank* (2010), which is also shaped by the well-known *G. I. Combat* (1961–1987). Sgt. Rock was nearly a superhero character, able with a

submachine gun to shoot down multiple Luftwaffe planes and never miss his target with a grenade. With a preternatural ability to predict enemy attacks and a nature kept cool under any enemy mortar barrage, Sgt. Rock survives issue after issue, and his hand-to-hand combat skills are unmatched. Veitch and Erskine copy his fighting aplomb with skill. The *Army@LOVE* comics, like *Our Army at War*, have a huge number of panels with close shots of victorious Coalition forces' faces. However, in the GWOT comics, there is no German surrender: there are, more realistically, an endless series of young terrorist fighters who are always soon replaced if any die. At least one hundred insurgents are killed in these comics, but with depressing regularity, there are always more volunteering for Jihad. Veitch and Erskine also seem influenced by the heavy shading and dark moods of the plagued, conspiratorial comics of Charles Burns, where there always seems to be infection and contagion turning beautiful young people into monsters, often through sex as in his Fantagraphics series, *Black Hole* (1995–2004). Rampant sex in the GWOT comics becomes a consistent way to deal with the trauma of killing and seeing the dead left behind. What is more, Veitch and Erskine's comic *Army@LOVE* shows the influence of the influential comics team of brothers—Jaime, Gilbert, and Mario Hernandez—where their big-hipped and large-thighed characters both wrestle and make love constantly, and women's beautiful bodies are celebrated as an escape from the ugliness of the world's fighting and death, particularly in their *Love and Rockets* series which is heavy on modern romance. *Army@LOVE*, I contend, is an attempt to evolve comics by more fully hybridizing the war and romance genres. As their co-creator Rick Veitch notes, who has worked on developing Alan Moore material before including *Swamp Thing* and *Shiny Beasts*, War Comics have “never really been developed like the superhero comics have. They still sort of exist back there in Roy Lichtenstein times. I just creatively saw the opening to take the old war comic and the old love comic and mash them together and see what grew out of it” (qtd. in Porter 2007). I see Veitch as doing more: he is deconstructing the old, vainglorious war comics, taking apart their iconic images and gluing them back together strangely and into our time, digging up their old and buried subtexts (e.g., Might equals right; Enemy deaths are not human deaths; The adversary is godless; The enemy is a demon unknowable; The American Way of Life is preferable to all others). From the viscera of the old war comics, Veitch and creative team string these theme entrails like catgut into a new pattern, a sustained narrative with gore, humor, anxiety, GWOT amnesia, and cultural

critique. Beneath *Army@LOVE*'s casual sex, rock music, firing of weapons, consumption of alcohol and drugs, and Dionysian weekend retreats, trauma lurks in the comics' gutters. The powerful undercurrent is a desire for self-obliteration, for the ultimate voluntary cessation and forgetting. We will see something Gothic creeps beneath this graphic novel's pictures of weapons firing and word balloons about to explode with Alpha-Destroyer combat talk.

Throughout the 18 issues that make up *Army@LOVE*, a story develops in Afbaghistan, a thinly veiled version of Iraq during the aftermath of Iraq War (with much attention to "the Bagh" or "Babylon," which seems a version of Baghdad with artistic license, and at times features elements of Afghanistan after the Afghanistan Invasion, and also "Outer Mongrolia," a version of Mongolia before international conglomerates descended upon it for its vast mineral riches. Veitch admits himself that *Army@LOVE* is "related to *Catch-22* and *M*A*S*H* and those type of satires that were done 10 or 15 years after the war [World War II and the Korean War]. The only thing that I've done that's radical here is I've gone right to the satire rather than give it the natural time frame to allow all the hurt and bad feelings to drain out" (qtd. in Porter 2007). In this satirical alternate history, the action is largely seen through the eyes and actions of the U.S. Secretary of State Stelaphane (with an uncanny visual likeness to the former Secretary of State Don Rumsfeld). Working under him is Healey, a technocrat and former vice-president of Polka Cola (which I read as Coca-Cola), who directs a military recruitment program that has helped the American war effort in the Middle East find more than enough volunteers by marketing-genius Healey selling the conflict as a bacchanal for beautiful people. The rest of the cast is a considerable numbers of U.S. administrators and infantry in country, their relatives back home in the United States, and then many hundreds of insurgents who are fought, as well as many enemy combatants who steal American assets and weapons with which they arm themselves to fight another day.

The conflict in the comics is largely about enlarging methods of recruitment of volunteers for America's wars, financing the war through more corporate sponsorship (allowing corporations more access to markets in America and the war-countries as long as for this quid pro quo they are willing to contribute money to the war effort), dealing with their ominous AI-based surveillance database called BIG FINGER (inspired possibly by the National Security Agency's program PRISM, a surveillance system scooping and storing millions of bits of data from Americans' and

foreigners' emails, banking, and phone calls). As the comic progresses to its last two issues, *BIG FINGER* becomes sentient and uncontrolled, keeping soldiers entertained with even more sex, drugs, music, and highly developed weaponry—or as one dazed, exhausted, and happy soldier in calls it, in a splash panel that looks like a cubist rendition of an orgy, “my Spring Break on Steroids.” These entertainments include regularly scheduled Pentagon-organized freaky sex sprees suspiciously reminiscent of Good Girls Company’s notorious four-day orgy extravaganzas (established 2017) on varying Caribbean islands offering “unlimited sex with 100 women” (Court 2022).

More than the militarily sanctioned “recreation,” the soldiers fighting in this comic (mostly coming from an Edgefield, New Jersey National Guard unit) have developed a secret, illicit sex society called “The Hot Zone Club.” They cope with the long periods of boredom in war by planning to have a peak-experience high that combines fear with desire: members of The Hot Zone Club get naked and make love during fire-fights with insurgents, right in buildings or even cemeteries where combat ensues. This is condoned by military authorities at the highest level. If their demographic target for recruitment is people who had adrenaline addictions and compulsivity for media growing up—watching a lot of intense action and horror and porn or playing first person shooter video games much of the night while enjoying the soft drinks and fast food that they are hooked on—then the marketer-extraordinaire Healey has a plan for them: the “Motivation and Morale” program of addictive edibles, exotic travel, weapons to fire, and military-sanctioned gang bangs.

Still, despite this ingenious advertising and promised debauchery, many glitches develop for the Masters of War in this comic, including the wife (named Allie) of Healey. After romantic affairs and dissipation while her husband is away, she becomes increasingly mentally unstable and threatens to confess some of the secrets of his work to the media, a force that seems absent from covering the actual combat (possibly Veitch’s satiric attack on the Pentagon’s rules of embedding the media in units, instead of letting them roam freely to report what goes on in restricted zones). Much of the comic aims its critique at the elaborate and unethical ways for luring people into battle and keeping them signed up for more tours like drug-and-sex addicts, effectively hiding the reality of combat to civilian taxpayers back home. Insurgents are killed much in the fashion we would see Russian, Arab, and Iranian combatants shot to death in a first- (FPS) or third-person shooter (TPS) video game. The U.S military in this comic offers the chance to shoot

people and demolish buildings and potentially make money by bringing in or taking away contraband with no personal expense or liability. Neither mind, body, nor soul of the invader/occupier seem at first injured in these comics. I cannot recall any of its American characters dying in the whole series of 18 issues, and they are rarely injured, except from self-injuries from playing too hard or having sex too often and indiscriminately. A few Western contractors are tied up at one point, and a rock band entertaining Baghdad is killed when a zeppelin hijacked by insurgents is hit by American rocket fire and collapses on the road out of Baghdad and flattens the bus hauling the rock stars away. Other than that, lots of service members are shot at but nobody even seems hit, playing into the myth of the invulnerable, happy, and forever young party dudes. The promise to these young Americans driving the mechanized armor and clearing buildings in the infantry is a mix of good times: lots of uninhibited boyfriends or girlfriends (on the same day) they may never see again and no sign of their own death on the horizon, without worry about making a living, making their own choice, or accountability for their acts. In a slight twist of a famous song of empty sensuality by Texan Robert Earl Keen, the party goes on forever and the road never ends.

However, the reality in these 18 issues of *Army@LOVE* is that enemy combatants are killed constantly in brutal ways, some civilians lay dead in streets, and prisoners of war are taken in for brutal questioning with black bags over their heads. The cover finale issue shows a female soldier snapping a picture of a detainee which evokes possibly the most haunting and traumatic photography from Abu Ghraib torture. Now iconic, it is the stark image of a man standing on a crate in a cell facing us, with black hood, sheet, and electrodes dangling (Fig. 2.2). In real life, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* identified this detainee as Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, although a number of detainees at Abu Ghraib were subject to similar torture, including an Iraqi mayor named Ali Shalal Qaissi (*Washington Post* Staff 2004; Zernike 2006). Army Specialist “Charles A. Graner Jr. took [Saad Faleh] to Abu Ghraib’s Room No. 37, a shower room, where ... the detainee nicknamed Gilligan by soldiers was ordered to stand on a box of food, clothed only in a blanket. An unidentified soldier then put the bag over his head. Wires were attached to his fingers, toes and genitals” and he was told that if he fell, he would be electrocuted (*Washington Post* Staff 2004). The grim Veitch-cover parody of Saad Faleh’s ordeal invites us to paint in the blanks in disturbing imitation of Paint-By-Number sets for children, as only two-thirds of it is colored, and the rest has numbers corresponding to our imagined paint hues. In the

end, some shadow falls over this graphic novel's happy valley. Indeed, in the last six issues, the comic book writer Rick Veitch himself is rounded up, placed in an orange prisoner's suit, and taken to a cell in a U.S. military prison in Gonlocomo Bay, Cuba, which closely resembles Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in its limbo-land terror. There we are troubled to the sight of the writer being mistreated by American military intelligence officers and interrogators abusing him for revealing American recruitment methods, whistleblowing on killings, and leaking too many secrets of state and warcraft and the BIG FINGER surveillance program (based on the NSA's mega-gatherer of big data, PRISM). We are ironically getting the narrative as the author is physically indisposed from writing it. The torturers hitting and waterboarding Veitch insist, "You've been googling top secret weapons systems for months." When the real-life author stops gasping for breath he admits, "What does it matter anyway? *Kofkoff!* The book didn't sell well. *Sputt!* People aren't ready to deal with the war yet" (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). The American GWOT inquisitors insist that is exactly how they want it to stay. These interrogators, like their president, are continuing to abuse the truth and threatening to kill its speakers.

The outré premise of Veitch's comic stunned, at first. *Publishers Weekly* on the graphic novel's release asked, "What in God's name is this?" Reviewer Chris Barsanti continued the questioning: "So pressed for manpower ... [the U.S. military] resorted to selling overseas deployment as a juiced-up adrenaline kick: it's like playing Xbox in a whorehouse during a raging shootout, offering soldiers bacchanalian 'retreats' and letting them carry cellphones into battle" (Barsanti 2007). It is evident in the comic that a sexual rush comes to those who prepare for battle, shoot, make love, and then shoot some more. They seem sad to ever go home to the United States again where life will be prosaic, and their adrenal glands will never again be pushed so much again. Though this sex was all apparently consensual, viewing the orgies on the pages we may initially recall recurring crises of actual sexual harassment and abuse that affected the four branches of the U.S. military and led to the Secretary of Defense admitting what a pervasive and chronic problem it is: "We must do more to eliminate sexual assault and sexual harassment from the ranks" (Austin 2021). However, somehow the sexual comments, gestures, and acts in this graphic novel (except for a subplot between North Korean spies infiltrating the American BIG FINGER surveillance software involving forced prostitution and honey traps) do not denote predation. No one looks anguished over it, complains, asks for it to stop, or is depressed. In summarizing the episodes

for an interviewer, Rick Veitch calls his characters' experiences "*Desperate Housewives* meets the War [on Terror]."

Consensual foreplay and sex between soldiers feature on the cover art of the first six issues. Inside the first issue, all begins with fine lines and brightly bold colors in visual splashes of the nubile flesh of recruits. It is true that later issue covers transition to updated iconic painting homages. One resembles Leonardo de Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with a helmet, M-16 with night scope, and olive fatigues from the GWOT. Another noteworthy cover of Veitch's evokes Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* with three marines, a detainee in orange jumpsuit with bag over head, and shattered plate windows from a car bomb. A third cover nods to Edward Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* except for the two nudes wearing dog tags, K-rations substituting for croissants and cherries; and lilted, bomb-blasted palm trees of the Iraqi desert standing in for the French painting's full and leafy trees of L'Île-Saint-Denis. Earthy subdued colors (especially grey, black, and brown) and blurred lines predominate in the most violent issue. This is seen most clearly on later covers, especially Veitch's "Finale" issue which imitates the famed hooded torture-on-a-box photograph from Abu Ghraib. This helps explain Canadian science fiction novelist and comics maker Cory Doctorow's verdict that these make "a funny comic book, but it's a deeply offensive—and completely though-provoking—kind of funny. . . . We need a lot more of it if we're to keep from laughing ourselves into the grave" (Doctorow 2008).

Inside the comics, hypersexualized, pants-off and helmet-on combat appears from the start, on the first issue's first pages set in "Najaf." It is perhaps a probable reference to the Battle of Najaf in 2003 and 2004—with Saddam Hussein's troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom in the first case and a battle with Islamist insurgents there a year later (a photograph of which features on the *Gothic War on Terror* cover). We are stunned that one of the sex partners does not have his or her head blown off during this battle with insurgents as they have sexual intercourse in a half-demolished building terrorists fire upon, screaming in orgasmic release as the bullets fly. After their surviving this, a reader learns to relax: these soldiers are like sexual superheroes, always ready to rut, and hard to kill off. But this lack of reality dogs the series for possibly too a long span. Somehow these American soldiers, this satire suggests, are hyper-alert even when surrendering themselves to their lovers while hiding in a sniper's roost. Other times, while discovered by insurgents during their trysts, an American female soldier will stun the attacker by standing up and giving a full view of her tall, naked, and

toned body, a welcoming of the foreign male gaze, while her American male soldier lover lifts his M16 *with his toes* and shoots bullets into the air, never missing the radical Islamist target. Rather than the problem of being blasted by insurgent fire, the deepest worry one female soldier who does this distraction act (Switzer) was that her husband back in America was accidentally listening live on the phone as she was making love to the male infantryman (Flabbergast) before and during combat moments.

One of the oddest aspects of this trauma narrative is that none of the actual infantry combat soldiers patrolling and running counter terrorism in this fictional Iraq ever discuss 9/11, patriotism, American Exceptionalism, Al Qaeda, or what the insurgents want, why the enemy keeps coming, any shortcomings in the Jihadist short-term tactics or successes, or what their long-term strategy is. Not one of the soldiers gives the reason for entering Afghanistan as the usual political litany: defending America, protecting democracy, liberating the autocratically oppressed foreign nation, or any of the other reasons we might expect gung ho soldiers to espouse early in their military tour of duty.

Some of this lack of awareness of the greater issues could be explained by their all being National Guard volunteers who never expected they would be deployed to a foreign war. However, none of them ever show fatigue or breakdowns or dissociation from their combat. None seem to be tired or anxious from their constant hypervigilance for rounds or mortars incoming from the hidden enemy. More from their behavior than their words, the motive behind disembarking in Afghanistan is to mate, to be freer sensually than they could be in America, shoot big guns, and sometimes sell what contraband they can bring in to country or take out.

The American soldiers would seem to be oblivious to the horrors or the honor, and this may at first seem a weakness of this comic book series. None of the American combat soldiers are even injured, which again may show the limits of the satire because of this artificial dome of protection that guards its cast. Death is all around them, yet never touches their own, and none of the soldiers want to return and stay at home in America for long. Some panels and covers show the aftereffects of car bombings, with a boy's eyeglasses tossed 20 feet from the explosion, near a little girl's single shoe. Some panels show Afghistani children playing in the street outside their doorway next to a man in civilian clothes splayed out on the road, dead for so long that flies have already laid their eggs in his mouth. They watch this street-corpse as an American surveillance camera—disguised as a tiny fly—courses into and out of the dead man's gaping mouth. Even odder might be the reaction to the series from defense insiders. Even

the arch-conservative *Army Times*, for example, a news source for “all branches of the U.S military, the global defense community, the U.S federal government, and ... Defense oriented industry sectors” established in 1940, gave a positive profile of this sharply satiric graphic novel (Staff 2022). The result of this review was, as the comic’s author remembers with surprise, that Veitch “got a bunch of e-mails from soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan asking how they could get a copy. I was concerned that people getting shot at over there might see the series as an attack on them, but the ones I heard from seemed to like the whole concept” (qtd. in Barsanti 2007). One could at first consider *Army@LOVE* a ribald satire that often makes no sense, a weird war narrative without trauma. Its combat soldiers and supporting personnel are, as Veitch accurately puts it, a “rowdy, bawdy bunch, brought up on Paris and Tommy Lee” (qtd. in Neil 2007) who must be “bribed into serving their country with promises of easy, consequence-free sex. Not exactly the Greatest Generation” (qtd. in Neil 2007). Every soldier in this graphic novel wishes to keep returning to this accursed land of high adrenaline, except for one. And that one American soldier used to be the one who loved his gun almost as much as the Pentagon-sponsored bacchanal retreats: a book-loving, bespectacled orgy-goer GI named Royden.

Connected to the AWOL Royden is the trope that Tim O’Brien’s striking Vietnam War novel *Going After Cacciato* offers: that of an officer following the trail of one of his AWOL subordinates, the eponymous Cacciato who leaves M&Ms, not footprints, as markers throughout Vietnam to form a kind of Fairy Tale crumb trail of candy for his commanding officer and the reader to track (O’Brien 1978). This device provides both suspense and a structure for the novel. Bringing the orgy-loving soldier in *Army@LOVE* back to base from the wilderness but also trying to glean what his searchers discover on the journey away from their military post become the widened mission. Critics have not yet investigated Royden, as he is not the central figure of the story, but in trauma terms he is the most interesting one because he changes the most and offers richer interpretations of his feelings than do the other soldiers. He is also the character who disappears and causes a manhunt. Via close analysis of Royden, I would like to suture aspects that connect terrorism and trauma to Gothic monstrosity.

The first indication that monsters will be the key to understanding Royden (and lead to his greater development and independence from the military) is when he is engaged in a firefight alongside the central character Switzer in a Baghdad mall. Between gunfire, he enters a store with disguises and takes a werewolf mask off the wall for himself, wearing it for

most of the issues, especially during gun and mortar battles, suggesting that the beast in him is unleashed. This lycanthropic masked figure Royden enjoys killing, and yet is critical of those who run the armed forces and command him to such battles. Closer to the end of the series, he is asked by Switzer's husband Loman, an American civilian who maintains an illegal car-import business to Afbaghistan, "What's with you young guys and the military? I mean, what's the attraction. ... I have a hard time getting' my head around the idea of taking orders and bein' shot at?" (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). Royden answers with more reflection than anyone else in the series, "They figured out how to package the ultimate high, Man. ... You Gen-X-Y-Z-ers and your geezer parents were the ones who left all these global catastrophes. Fucked-up wars, fucked-up environment. All of it left for *us* to fix. ... At least let us have a good time doing it" (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). This reflection comes during a secret and dangerous mission to Outer Mongrolia to find the abducted wife of military enrollment administrator Healey, Allie. Royden joins others to find and return Allie, but instead he finds a real monster, a primate larger than human size, with preternatural rock-climbing abilities, of flowing black hair, tremendous arm strength, and exaggerated incisors. This creature is what one of the residents of "Sinkyang Frontier, Outer Mongrolian Republic" calls "the Mother of the Mountain," and another character calls "a yeti," and a third calls "a were creature who feeds on dreams" (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). In actual folklore, this creature has a place in Mongolian culture and is called something not named in the comic anywhere: an "Almas." Indeed, in 1964, the famed Soviet-era social scientist and historian Boris Porshnev risked his career to contend that the Almas were a kind of Neanderthal left over from the Pleistocene era and led expeditions to search for them. No proof was found, yet Lee Spiegel reports that from the 1990s on, "sightings of the Siberian [and Mongolian] Snowmen have increased three-fold ... Prompting scientists at Moscow's Darwin Museum to speculate [again] that there may be a small population of these creatures actually still alive" (Speigel 2017; Porshnev 2021). In Royden's case, the Almas is neither shy nor sexually satisfied and chases him and knocks him off a rocky outcrop to probable death. A search by his soldier-in-arms Flabbergast, albeit halfhearted, is conducted, and Royden is miraculously found: in the den of the hairy jet-black Almas monster, she is making monstrous love to him, and both are exploding over and over with loud orgasms. This is a kink that even the most alert readers, not to mention the rescuer Flabbergast who is flabbergasted, will not see coming.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's influential ideas on monsterhood, miscreations, attractions to them, and Gothic writing could helpfully come into the analysis. Cohen asserts that "From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes.... One is better off safely contained within one's own domestic sphere than abroad" (Cohen 1996). Possibly the first sighting of the monster that Royden made was his warning, but he plunged ahead, for he "always loved monsters" (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). Cohen's other precept, that "to step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself," starts to become true here as well (Cohen 1996). Royden is bitten by the Almas on the lips, and some of his blood is tasted by her. Cohen's central idea is fulfilled in this romance between Royden and what the comic calls "the Mother of the Mountain," for as Cohen pledges, "the monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies... We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair" (Cohen 1996). What is happening is spelled out finely by Cohen, as Royden has been copulating throughout the graphic novel, but he has not had any ecstatic sex until now. And perhaps this is because, as Cohen astutely intuits, "The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality" (Cohen 1996).

If the Almas are often running away from wilderness that the Homo Sapiens keep encroaching on, so will Royden become the first and only runaway soldier from his battalion, the one who most openly notices that his generation has been pawned by more powerful forces. Just as Royden embraces the possible existence of the monster, eventually finds its cave, and is seduced by the monster in her lair, making hairy love with her constantly for the rest of the comic, so he embraces the idea of going AWOL. Failure to report for duty in the military or intending to abandon one's post, as Royden should know well, in Operation Iraqi Freedom leads to "a bad-conduct discharge, forfeiture of pay, reduction to lowest enlisted grade, and confinement [in military brig] for six months" (Staff 2020, Cannon & Associates). However, monsters re-arrange our understanding of relationships as well as views of our duty to career, and even a soldier's perception on the crime of desertion and its punishments. Cohen offers a concept to his Monster Theory that gets particular emphasis in this graphic novel, for "The habitations of the monsters ... are more than dark regions

of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation. Their monsters serve as secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored” (Cohen 1996). In the caves of remote Outer Mongolia there is not just one Almas, there is another, and she has joined Royden and his love to form a swirling, jumping, banging monster three-way. The series concludes by giving Royden nearly the last word on war service, bestiality, and his Gothic life. He tells his fellow soldiers Switzer and Flabbergast during their secret mission in Outer Mongolia far from the front in Afghanistan that the Almas can make him one of them. They respond, “You sure you want to do that, Royden? ... Taking on a werewolf is a pretty big step” (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). Royden puts on his Frankenstein creature mask and snaps a line to his soldier mates, “Hey—I’m the guy who grew up on *Munsters* reruns. [Now] it’s like I died and went to Heaven. *Hoo-ah!*” (Veitch and Erskine 2007–2009). That is the last readers ever see of the contented deserter Royden. His fighting days are done. Perhaps his exit is well predicted by Cohen’s theory that “the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies... We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom” (Cohen 1996). This is a series that sows radical distrust of American politico-military policies in its readers and grows support for runaway Royden himself. Royden’s time for inflicting more trauma in the land of Afghanistan is over, and the AWOL soldier may never be found. Here, the monster is no scapegoat; here, the monster will not be destroyed. In a flourish not to be mistaken, Royden no longer wears his Werewolf mask (it was swept off him when the Almas first threw him off the edge of a cliff). He keeps on his new Frankenstein’s Monster mask, and the Creature that is Royden finally has his bride, or two of them.

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Kyle Baker's *Special Forces* (2009): Jihad, Infantrywomen, & Orphan Kidnappers

Just as recruitment for the U.S. military during the GWOT (Gothic War on Terror) was a prime mover of the plot in *Army@LOVE*, so the quest to find new soldiers for OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) drives New York born Kyle Baker's graphic novel, *Special Forces*. Starting a six issue story in 2007 for Image Comics, Baker collected them in a 2009 volume, positioning the problem of finding enough recruits as the Iraq war drags on as a severe one, leading to desperation on the military's part. And no upper management in U.S. armed forces recruitment personnel of *Special Forces* can conceive as successful a plan for military-marketing as brilliantly as Rick Veitch's former Polka Cola CEO Colonel Healey does in *Army@LOVE* via promises of sex with uninhibited, young, beautiful, and varied partners; lots of free parties with alcohol and concerts; and the latest military hardware with endless ammunition to blast away anything in a recruit's way. Baker, known as one of the leading Black comics makers of our time, has won Eisner Awards eight times by 2022, and stands out for writing the stories and creating the art, lettering, and coloring, which no other author does that I survey. A veteran comics crafter, he has drawn/written such recognized characters as Spider-Man, Dick Tracy, Plastic Man, Deadpool, the X-Men, Batman, the Joker, Dracula, Hellraiser, and even the cast of *Looney Tunes*, *The Simpsons*, and *Goosebumps*. He has also drawn historical figures of rebellion, including the story of Nat Turner's 1831 slave revolt Southampton County, Virginia where over 50 members of slave owning families were slain (in the 2015 Harvey Award winning comic, *Nat Turner*).

In 2006, Baker came across a newspaper's exposé showing how the U.S. military had knowingly recruited for OIF combat an 18-year-old man with autism, resulting in a lawsuit filed from the young man's parents, and the military's releasing him from contract. That case fueled Baker interest in writing the satiric comic which he "solemnly" dedicates to "the memories of the countless, nameless, unspeakably brave mentally handicapped and/or felons who have given their lives in service of Freedom. We hope to someday be worthy of your sacrifice" (*Special Forces* 2009, final page). We may detect a note of sarcasm and anger not only in his memorial dedication but in most pages of the work itself. *The New York Times* correctly captures Baker's plot of surprise, noting "the premise [is] that every lie the Bush administration told about the war was true. So terrorists declare, 'We hate your freedom'; felons forced into military service become brave tactical geniuses who wouldn't dream of hurting children; and Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are not only real but concealed in an oil refinery, where Americans would never think to look because of course the war wasn't about oil" (Wolk 2009). Indeed, the comic closes with a search for an African Jihadist leader in Baghdad, who has directed a number of attacks on Coalition forces and the beheadings of Western contractors, named The Desert Wolf. He is found in an Iraqi refinery. He has also been pursuing, luring, and ambushing Coalition soldiers, sacrificing some of them in a ritualistic style.

The first two pages of the comic opens with some of the boldest colors in the whole graphic novel—peach, emerald, coffee, hazel, and brilliant carmine—all bright hues because it is an explosion from a triggered mine (Fig. 6.1). The carmine is the color of the blood of the gunner on top of what we are shown elsewhere through the GWOT media's military-speak is a "High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle" (HMMWV or Humvee). The gunner's head has blown apart by an insurgent's rocket-propelled grenade. This leads to the first seven words of the text: "*BLAM!* The Black guy dies first. FUCK!" (a probable allusion to a standard early death trope of a minority within American horror films since the 1960s). Thus begins a hyper-sexualized and gruesome comic of bodies being torn asunder, sometimes from friendly fire including a waywardly directed rocket from a U.S. Apache helicopter, and sometimes from the crash of a Black Hawk helicopter onto the U.S. military below. One by one, a fresh squad (originally nine American soldiers) from this doomed platoon of highly pressed recruits is killed off, until only two remain. This surviving duo were once called "misfits" by the popular kids at the same high school



Fig. 6.1 Devices like this mine (along with IEDs) blow up both American Humvees and motorized armor throughout *Special Forces*, decimating the protagonist's U.S. infantry squad to just two soldiers left alive. The mines also threaten American tanks in *Haunted Tank*. (Photo: PDUSG)

the two went to. Now these once despised ones who always socially finished last are about to become heroes. One is “Felony,” who wears almost nothing as she storms into battle, but keeps her helmet on all the time. Brave, quick to fight, rageful, and resourceful, she survives with “Zone,” a young, shy man diagnosed as autistic and whose goal is to stay firmly locked on to the mission. He disciplines his mind by writing down a few tasks commanded to him and continually looking back at the list. Others, including the soldiers named Squid and Washington are shattered by pages one and two by gunfire and grenades. And over the course of the next 25 pages, 5 more patrolling soldiers are torn apart, again some by friendly fire. Rocky, Hummer, Doughboy, Doberman, and Sergeant Ramirez are blasted, their bodies flying in chunks across panels with boldly drawn lines that are full of anger, madness, and anxiety, images that prefigure the desecration of the human body seen in Baker's graphic novel of insurrection and a just war, *Nat Turner*. Here his art moves away from offering lines that provoke senses of calm and reason in a reader, to a style that evokes images as far back as Edvard Munch's paintings on cardboard, to Rory Hayes' underground cartoons, Krystine Kryttre's punk 'zines,

and Art Spiegelman's guilt-wracked and claustrophobically sorrowful strip about his mother's death, *Prisoner of the Hell Planet*.

In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Baker calls his doomed squad "kind of a team of f***ups—y'know, kinda like *Stripes*? I'm a big fan of *Catch-22*, *M*A*S*H*, war comedies like that.... War stories are always where you introduce a bunch of guys and then you kill 'em off. I've been reading a lot of *Sgt. Rock* lately" (Baker 2007). Baker is, in his own words, "blowing people up, chopping 'em up, killing them in gruesome ways. ... Most of this stuff is based on true things that I read in the newspaper" (Baker 2007). He wants his comic to cut through the grand illusion: "The guys who are over there—they're not dumb, they know why they're there.... They are just there because they've got nothing else to do. Nobody on earth at this point believes it's about anything except oil. You can't say it's about democracy or freedom or Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden or the World Trade Center—it's bullshit" (Baker 2007). Despite all of this stripping away of honor and patriotism that Baker makes, the two most scorned members of the unit actually do fight with valor, dedication, and success, more than any of the comic satires in novel, TV, or film form that Baker cites.

As I have remarked in *9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City's Terrorism Novels* (Olson 2021), in relation to Patrick McGrath's novels of tortured narrators, "one trauma in a disturbed psyche always hides yet can reveal an earlier trauma" (Olson 2021: 148). In other words, the later trauma (coming months or years after the major earlier one) brings to heart and mind much of the disabling pain that one has suffered before. Similarly, for both *Felony* and *Zone*, they were mocked, entrapped, tricked, and snubbed before—treated as less than human. Now in the GWOT, they both find all this mistreatment revisits them, with the exception that the enemy has semi-automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. When *Zone* and *Felony* seem paralyzed at moments during capture or firefights in OIF, they may be simultaneously reliving past torments and humiliations. Indeed, looking carefully at Baker's portraits, the look in their eyes during wartime mimics their visages from earlier high school suffering.

Perhaps the most weirdly Gothic element in the comic is the Desert Wolf insurgency leader. He appears and disappears into thin air, and often materializes in Baker's frames akin to a desert djinn inscribed on a charm, drawn on a talisman, or romanticized as imprisoned in a bottle from films, paintings, and the enchanting fourteenth-century Arabic *Book of Wonders* (*Kitāb al-Bulhān*) compiled by Abd al-Hasan Al-Isfahani and first bound

in Baghdad (Al-Isfahani 1390). Somewhere between an angel and a demon this force of Islamic terror lives, and Baker draws his Desert Wolf as an awesome creature of the shadows, especially when silhouetted before the Hands of Victory at Baghdad's Grand Festivities Square. Like a djinn, he is from "a third race of being created by Allah" (Sager 2019) according to Middle Eastern lore.

The Nubian-black Desert Wolf's name suggests that like a djinn, he "can assume the form of, and possess, humans and animals—and can even teleport between dimensions, ... [having] a wide range of powers from shapeshifting and invisibility to psychic abilities and mind control" (Sager 2019) His strong angled face hovers over Westerners that he is about to execute by sword—including the captive Zone who Felony is trying to find and rescue. His decapitations are broadcast in real time by logging on to the terror group's website. I would argue that his power to terrorize comes, in part, from his presence being a Gothic distillation of sublime and magical djinn from a 1709 Syrian version of *The Arabian Nights*, especially the nested tales of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp," "The Fisherman and the Genie," and "The Story of the Merchant and the Genie" (Horta 1709/2022).

But djinns continue to enliven and curse modern families as they haunted those of the past. The djinns and their Gothic stories are alive in contemporary literature, from S. A. Chakraborty's *The City of Brass* (2017), *The Kingdom of Copper* (2019), and *The Empire of Gold* (2020) to Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013). Arguably the most remarkable Afghan-British travel writer in a generation, Tahir Shar, evokes the places of djinns past and present in his *In Arabian Nights* (2007) and his unsettling and often humorously resigned memoir of his family's haunted Morocco home, *The Caliph's House* (2006), which includes djinn-exorcisms that my students have both shuddered and laughed at, and happy feasts for hungry house staff as they come upon the ritually slaughtered animals intended for the djinn.

But some of the characters in *Special Forces* watching the Desert Wolf's executions on their iPhones are an equally uncanny and Gothic force in the graphic novel, as well. Rapt to the live-broadcast decapitations stand a band of injured war orphans living together in a building who seek people, preferably fighters against Iraq in the GWOT, to abduct from the street, truss, and torture. Their latest abductee is Private First Class Felony, who resists but is overcome by the sheer numbers of scuttling orphans from the ongoing GWOT. Tied up on a table by their many hands made grubby by

their begging, she awaits a long ordeal and eventual death. The orphans—whom she names “the Axis of Evil Mutants”—draw near with blades to slice her exposed flesh and lit cigarettes to stab into her “warmonger” eyes. And then all is suspended. Their orphan’s leader emerges. In his grotesque shape, his dark charisma, his hunger for vengeance, and even in the suspension of his body by another, as if growing out of a larger person’s abdomen, he appears a direct imitation of Kuato (played by Marshall Bell), the mutant who grows out of his brother’s stomach in the blockbuster film with Arnold Schwarzenegger as a planet traveler, *Total Recall* (1990). This mutant creature, in his own words, was “created by depleted uranium” (Baker 2009). He vows that “Allah has used the Heathen’s own weapons to fashion me into an instrument of Divine Vengeance.” Soon with its anger and its mental forces that can “dominate weaker wills,” the barely two foot tall would-be Jihadi idol insists, “the World will cover in subservience to my power! Soon Mankind shall tremble before the awesome might of the Axis of Evil Mutants!” (Baker 2009).

The connections between the mutant leader’s pompous exhortation, which however Monty Pythonesque still causes his fun-size followers to chant his name, and Dr. Frankenstein’s musing before making his misbegotten son, the miscreation that kills members of his own family, are notable. We remember Dr. Frankenstein muses on why he made the creature, and it is to be worshiped like a god-father and praised for solving the greatest puzzle for what he calls the “reasoning animal”—death itself. Dr. Frankenstein confesses to Captain Walton that

What had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world, was now within my grasp. Not that, like a magic scene, it all opened upon me at once: the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search, than to exhibit that object already accomplished. I was like the *Arabian* [emphasis mine] who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light.... A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (Shelley 2017)

So goes Dr. Frankenstein’s delusions of grandeur and hoped-for future hosanas to his name. The deaths of those he loves is not prevented by any of his efforts, only hastened and made more agonizing, shaming his name

forever in the progress. What *Special Forces* adds to Dr. Frankenstein's sustained meditation on death, the unforeseen consequences of meddling with nature, cowardice, and secrets is something freshly haunting. *Frankenstein* offered the fear of death by contagion, as we remember Victor's mother contracts a fatal fever while tending Dr. Frankenstein's Intended, Elizabeth. But *Special Forces* adds to with the pain and deformity of intentional radiation poisoning, something Dr. Frankenstein lived too early in history to guess at.

More richly than any other comic investigated in this book, Baker's work makes readers ask why America purposely drops radioactive material on an enemy state, as in the form of depleted uranium shells fired on Iraq during the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and then in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 onward. Baker also makes us restlessly ask why the American and Coalition forces do not even clean up the poison after the long-sought "victory" is won. Why is it after a flight-suited President George W. Bush poses on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003, before a "Mission Accomplished" sign and concludes "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed" (Bush 2003) there is no mention of repairing the horrendous damage to Iraq and needless radiation exposure? Why drop ordnance that will cause birth defects for generations? These mutant orphans of different ages in the comic apparently were affected by radiation from both the 1991 and 2003 wars. Indeed, *The Guardian* reports that "More than 300,000 depleted uranium rounds are estimated to have been fired during the 2003 Iraq war, the vast majority by US forces. A small fraction were from UK tanks, the coordinates for which were provided to the UN Environment Programme. A further 782,414 DU rounds are believed to have been fired during the earlier conflict in 1991, mostly by US forces" (Edwards 2014). To give us a sense for how grave this is, chemist Chris Busby notes that in Fallujah, Iraq, a health crisis emerged after a series of battles with Coalition forces using depleted uranium: it represents "the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied" (qtd. in Jamail 2013). Official Iraqi government statistics establish that "prior to the outbreak of the First Gulf War in 1991, the rate of cancer cases in Iraq was 40 out of 100,000 people. By 1995, it had increased to 800 out of 100,000 people, and, by 2005, it had doubled to at least 1,600 out of 100,000 people" (Jamail 2013). Like other war crimes documented

earlier in my book, this repeated use of radioactive material which kills civilians and leaves behind orphans seems one more war crime that should be heard at the Hague, and one wonders why the United States escapes prosecution or even the drawing of charges.

The Iraq War's Frankenstein creature—this deformed orphan oracle-child—does not have his way. Private First Class Felony, determined to not kill children of the war but sensing her time alive is short beneath their small hands and fiendish weapons, disarms them. Their unwariness is due to their cell phones. Still watching live executions with delight on their four inch screens, several of the killer kids are overcome when Felony blows enormous bubble gum balloons into their ugly mugs, as they did not think to frisk her and take her stash (a soldier's natural choice: Bazooka bubble gum) before tying her up. The gruesome insurgent children have little defense when, in true comic book style, giant pink gummy bubbles go splat in their little cruel faces. Felony repulses the fiendish waifs—"Got to disarm them without killing them!" (Baker 2009)—then gathers firearms, shoots all around them but not into their small scarred bodies, and clambers down the stairs of the derelict building, and away. On the street, Felony finds a version of Blackwater mercenaries outside (called simply in a stroke of sewer jest by Baker: "Greywater") who are willing to give her a ride to safety. Sexual advances are made by the Greywater reprobates, which she fends off with claims of PMS and terrifying accounts of what she has done to men in the past who harass.

The graphic novel finally has Felony reuniting with Zone who has escaped the Desert Wolf. The denouement happens in an oil refinery near Baghdad where Zone suddenly is immolated, but so is the Desert Wolf. While the insurgent leader is defeated in flames after a massive fight, not all is well. Felony will never say, "Mission Accomplished!" On the final page, the refinery explodes, the same place that has been ironically concealing some of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction that eluded American and Coalition troops in reality. The comic book, like the Coalition's invasion of Iraq itself that allowed the tensions between schisms to play out murderously for the beginning of a new civil war, leaves it open to interpretation whether Iraq as a country will recover. Will Bagdad be completely destroyed by these nerve agents, or will the cradle of civilization somehow survive? Is this the Apocalyptic Gothic's last page? Has the new Babylon forever fallen? Baker leaves it up to the reader, and the Series has not been revived.

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Frank Marraffino and Henry Flint's *Haunted Tank* (2009–2010): Bastards, Civil War, & Spectral Generals

Race plays a role in Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Special Forces* starting from page one where, as we observe in horror movies from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) forward, "The Black guy dies first" (Baker 2009). However, writer Frank Marraffino's and artist Henry Flint's *Haunted Tank* obsesses over skin color from its first page to its last. Much of it has almost all its tank crew characters during the first days of the invasion of Iraq pigeonholing someone based on their skewed ideas of ethnicity and race, or national origin or creed and religion and family, or as the unnerving ghost of a Confederate general tells the crew in 2003: "Blood lineage" (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010, 16). Even in the midst of most furious battles with Fedayeen (Dictator Hussein's anti-tank squads or the black-dressed pro-Ba'athist paramilitary organization wielding rocket launchers, AKA "Saddam's Enforcers"), we read the uttered slurs against all sides: "Towel heads," "camel jockeys," "dune coons," "infidel invaders," "imperialist satans," "Chinaman," "heathen," "honky tonk butts," "jungle born bush jumpers," "white on white wraith," "stupido blanquito," "fuckin' Mexican," "darky," "soldiering nigras," "Hajji sand-good pendejos," "Yankee monkey men," "hillbillies," and lamentably worse (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010). No one can get any respect. Even the Gothic ghost, so deadly with his sword as he rides on his steed in half of the graphic novel's panels, is mocked on the basis of color—his silvery blue body. Only the deserts of Iraq seem impartial and beyond the folly of

human theories of race and deplorable hierarchies and disgraceful name-calling. The dunes quietly accept without reservation all bodies and blood from either side. In this comic, the desert takes children and adults, civilians and soldiers, men and women, and holds them close forever, becoming the most dependable and august presence in the book. All people are created equal to the sands of Iraq. Not one is placed higher or luckier or more deserving of life than another. Every drop the desert drinks from their veins is the same in the sun, ever crimson bright, and gratefully taken.

Though I would argue that the diseases of racism and nationalism are at the heart of trauma within *Haunted Tank*, that lasting horror haunting from one generation to the next, reviewers have seen it differently. To give background, DC Comics released the original concept of *Haunted Tank* in May 1961 running until 1987, created by artist Russ Heath and composed by Robert Kanigher (Staff 2020). *Haunted Tank* was so successful that it was trumped only by DC's *Sgt. Rock* comics as their longest-running combat series (Staff 2020). Set in both Europe and Asia during World War II, this prototype *Haunted Tank* featured the military adventures of one Lt. Jeb Stuart, often rescued in combat by the phantom of his forefather, General James Ewell Brown (J.E.B.) Stuart of the Confederate States of America, a decorated figure from Southern history (until more of his past was known—currently his statues are being removed from Southern parks and city buildings as this book goes to press). In Frank Marraffino's and artist Henry Flint's new version, the action takes place in the first stages of the Coalition's attack on Iraq. General J.E.B. Stuart rises from his American grave and drifts to Iraq to battle alongside and (several times) save the lives of a thoroughly disoriented MIA Abrams tank crew in southern Iraq. The tank's commanding sergeant is Jamal Stuart. Everyone sees the ghost and is taken aback that the White man is the great, great grandfather the Black tank commander. One review finds that "though the bickering, mostly about race, between the two Stuarts can get a bit tiresome, Marraffino's script is entertaining and at times hilarious. Henry Flint's highly detailed artwork ... [captures] the ugliness of war, as well as its sometime morbid absurdity" (Lohr 2010). Lohr's more interesting formulation is that ideological posturing is at the heart of the book: "*Haunted Tank* is a well-made and thought-provoking book, commenting not just on racial politics and the Iraq War, but also on the concepts of honor and glory, and how they are viewed and sometimes exploited during times of war" (Lohr 2010). Another critic, for IGN, Dan Phillips largely disagrees and finds "the problem with this book is that the tone

changes drastically from page to page, and most significantly, none of these tones ring true. Is this an ironic black comedy? An exploration of racial injustice? Is it a look at how wars evolve technically without ever really changing all that much? Marraffino clearly intends his book to be all these things, but unfortunately fails to deliver any of them very effectively" (Phillips 2012).

I find my reaction to the comic falling between these extremes, aligning closer to a later *Comic Books Review*: The ghost of "General J.E.B. Stuart is a man who takes what he wants. He makes war out of a sense of conquest, because he loves the thrill of the battle, the satisfaction of defeating an enemy and taking what once belonged to someone else. Marraffino makes this characterization explicit, as Sergeant Stuart reacts to a reminiscence by the general with words that call out his ancestor as the greedy rapist that he truly is" (Callahan 2009). This insight provides us with some scaffolding that the comic supports: the modern OIF tank commander Jamal Stuart will not understand his forefather's world and the ghost's urgings, and the Civil War General will not understand the modern world and the living and his grandsire's impatience and disdain. But both will come to understand how a civil war gets brewing (in antebellum America, especially after abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, and in Iraq immediately after the collapse of dictator Saddam Hussein). Timothy Callahan is correct in that this comic goes beyond intriguing characterizations to actually forming an allegory: "The thirst that drives this ghost of the Confederacy who prances around on his magical spirit horse—is the thirst that led to the taking of Baghdad and while the generals and politicians might be all too eager to make those kinds of decisions, it's the men and women on the ground who have to deal with the consequences" (Callahan 2009).

To go further in showing this comic's value in understanding terror and trauma through a Gothic lens of spectrality, I would contend that it is the most horrific example of intergenerational trauma in the GWOT media investigated in my study. During peak battle scenes of the Iraq invasion of 2003, the galloping ghost-rapist of Sergeant Jamal Stuart's great-great-great-grandmother rides beside him. This realization is being discovered by both the ghost and descendant at roughly the same time. Some of the richest Gothic-inflicted American stories have dealt with slavery and rape in compelling and heartbreaking ways, too, especially the flashbacks within Octavia Butler's stunning 1979 novel *Kindred*, made by Damian Duffy and John Jennings into a brilliant Bram Stoker Award winning comic from Abrams

Books (Duffy and Jennings 2017), an award for which I proudly accepted as that press's emissary at the 2018 StokerCon. In Butler's novel and successful comic, the Black narrator herself travels back in time every time her White master (who is a child at first) is endangered. In that other plantation place of the past, she is beaten, threatened with rape, and chased by slave-hunting gangs. In Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (Morrison 1979), inspired by the actual case of the Kentucky fugitive slave Margaret Garner, a mother saves her young daughter from being destroyed by slavery through killing her, dying to avoid slavery's brutality and separation.

The collective nature within such transgenerational trauma may be on display within the tank crew. Besides the suffering endured by the Black tank commander Jamal Stuart for the color of his skin, there are unhealed wounds from the others he fights with. "Chop Chop" is the nickname of the discriminated against Korean-American soldier who loads the tank barrel's shells. He uses the epithet as an apparent act of reclamation against those who refer to Asians simply as "Chop" or "Chop Suey." "Hot Rocks," an allusion to male hypersexuality, is nickname of the Hispanic gunner, stereotyped for island licentiousness as he is from Puerto Rico. Hot Rocks seems understandably and permanently angry, always in a defensive posture, and projecting his anger as he fires shells into the desert, firing off curses at remembered acts of attempted or successful victimization of himself and other Puerto Ricans. Intent on feeling superior to somebody, the driver Beauregard, a creole Southerner, has endured criticism because of his "ragin' Cajun" background and the branding of being "White trash." Beauregard carries and displays a Confederate flag, which only inflames the others' transgenerational wounds with its salute to the hierarchies and fixed social strata of the Old South, and seems awestruck and mesmerized by the ghost of the general and the return to segregated values he stands for. The whole crew, then, has been carrying a collective trauma for much of their lives, as did their parents and grandparents and beyond. Though transgenerational trauma was originally seen and then written of in medical literature, by 1966, a change in view occurred. Discussing descendants of Holocaust survivors, Dr. Vivian Rakoff noticed that these grown children sought psychiatric therapy 300 percent more often than the general population (Braga et al. 2012). In the decades following, intergenerational trauma was tracked in populations including descendants of people who suffered partner abuse, attempted eradication (war survivors, refugees, native or first-nation peoples), and violence against immigrants (who came voluntarily to American shores or in chains). The psychiatric disorders of

these patients was historical trauma: they were a “‘survivor syndrome’ perpetuated from one generation to the next” (Braga et al. 2012). With parents and grandparent figures manifesting PTSD symptoms, the next generation has their own traumatic response. Caregivers suffering PTSD often have children who have developmental trauma disorders as well (O’Neill et al. 2016). Psychologist researchers find such children often have trouble modulating their feelings, and the constant rage within tank commander Jamal Stuart of Detroit, now lost in the sands of Iraq, suggests he is the grown figure of such a child—lost in aggression, threats, and blame.

That said, there is debate about whether trauma can even be passed generationally. Associate Professor in Developmental Neurobiology and Genetics at Trinity College Dublin Kevin Mitchell doubts intergenerational transmittance of trauma and has fought against what he calls “the temptations of neuro-reductionism” (qtd. in McKenna 2020). Likewise, Dr. John Birney, who helped sequence the human genome in 2000 and a founder of the Ensemble browser for the human genome, as well as an honorary Cambridge University professor, has tried to push back against theories of transgenerational trauma. So, too has Ibram X. Kendi, professor of History and International Relations and the founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, the author of National Book Award for Nonfiction winner *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016). Kendi, as a Black scholar who has built a career fighting racism, has argued especially hard against the idea of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, finding it a racist concept itself. He claims that “traumatic and dehumanizing oppressions [like slavery] actually did not succeed in dehumanizing Black people and leaving them adversely traumatized” (Kendi 2016). His message is that “Countless historians have chronicled freed Blacks’ successful struts off plantations and into politics, labor organizing, artistry, entrepreneurship, club building, church building, school building, community building—buildings that were oftentimes razed not by self-destructive PTSS, but the fiery hand of Jim Crow” (Kendi 2016). Kendi is a proponent of positive thinking over all: “Black people must realize that the only thing wrong with Black people is that we think something is wrong with Black people. Black Americans’ history of oppression has made Black opportunities—not Black behaviors—inferior” (Kendi 2016). All that considered, these still seem, however eloquently or authoritatively defended, minority opinions on transgenerational trauma. Is Black Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder really a racist fallacy? If so, how to explain more

and more including articles in *Scientific American* showing epigenetic markers on the children of Holocaust survivors that indicate elevated stress levels in their hormones, suggesting that having parents who faced trauma too often leads to children having a reduced power to withstand or bounce back from mental distress (Rodriguez 2015)? It is a curious coincidence with *Haunted Tank* that one of the first studies that raised the possibility of epigenetic markers was done on U.S. surviving prisoners of war from Civil War camps. For the crew in *Haunted Tank*, especially for its commander, their Post-Traumatic Stress interferes with running their mission well and is truly a disorder. Perhaps this whole crew has heritable trauma, harmed from before they were born. Benedict Carey surveys two cases in the growing epigenetic field to make us wonder:

Researchers in California published a study of Civil War prisoners that came to a remarkable conclusion. Male children of abused war prisoners were about 10 percent more likely to die than their peers were in any given year after middle age.... The idea is that trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, which then is passed down to subsequent generations. The mark doesn't directly damage the gene; there's no mutation. Instead it alters the mechanism by which the gene is converted into functioning proteins, or expressed. The alteration isn't genetic. It's epigenetic. (2018)

This finding is not an anomaly. The California research was reinforced a decade before by scientists who found that Netherlanders who were exposed in the womb to the Dutch Hunger Winter of “famine toward the end of World War II, carried a particular chemical mark, or epigenetic signature, on one of their genes. The researchers later linked that finding to differences in the children's health later in life, including higher-than-average body mass” (Carey 2018). It raises the notion of whether the children of the tank crew here could possibly have epigenetic markers too, inheriting the traumas of their fathers and mothers. We would have to wait for future issues in the double sense of their offspring and DC's continued war comics featuring this cast and their descendants.

But what about when characters manifest many (perhaps not all) indicators of Post-Traumatic Stress, yet it seems not to be maladaptive to their acts, never truly functioning as a disorder? Are there such characters in this war comic and other GWOT works? To help appreciate where the Post-Traumatic Stress reaches a disorder point and where it does not, we remember that Trauma-Gothic storytelling media and Gothic criticism lay

as much importance on what the dead do and say as the living. General J. E. B. Stuart is an example, I contend, of one who has Post-Traumatic Stress over killings and rapes and witnessing the burnings of Southern cities as well as sensing the Confederacy's looming unconditional surrender before his dying. But now as a ghost, he has not all of the signs of the disorder show in his acts, looks, or words. The last letter in PTSD, standing for disorder, is not guaranteed to happen when people experience trauma. This sometimes is even the case when Complex Post Traumatic Stress happens, or when the overwhelming incidents are ongoing and chronic (including microaggressions and discrimination) and not one-time only (van der Kolk et al. 2003). Indeed, these war traumas do not render him helpless. His dangerous alpha-warrior spirit never breaks: the general is heedless and takes all. Where his destruction happens is at both battlefields and bedrooms, plantation salons and slave shacks. In OIF battle as a warrior ghost, he is defeating soldiers and technology that would have confounded other Confederate generals, even his commander General Robert E. Lee, I daresay, whose once-lauded military prowess is being devalued by historians as I write. Within the Iraq war, General J. E. B. Stuart rushes into that Middle Eastern space where there is the keenest "opposition between modernity and barbarism [which is] at the heart of much Gothic fiction" (Heholt 2007, 171), but his ghost itself rises from another space where modernity once duelled with barbarism: the Old South. What is fascinating in this disturbed contentious space near the end of the graphic novel is that it is General J. E. B. Stuart's face that dominates it. Sallie's face is there, as well: the young slave woman he once dominated and raped, one of a long series of subjected women namelessly bearing his children, as he returns to the slave shacks of his plantation regularly over the years. We recognize this slave-shack invasion as a deplorable, repeated pattern for the General as it is revealed through the artist changing his face from clean-shaven once to heavily bearded at other times as he bursts through their doors and onto the women's beds.

It may be that General J. E. B. Stuart does suffer some of the symptoms of Perpetrator Trauma. Like some American combat soldiers returning from the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War, he does endure unwanted thoughts and flashbacks, is hypervigilant, and feels alienation. His mind is blasted by images of a crying woman that he is trying to rape who is begging him to stop; he sees and hears the voice of an older slave woman damning him to a curse, that his soul will fight forever; and he sees a vision of General Robert E. Lee damning him

for his overreach. General Stuart, we discover, stayed behind Union forces for reconnaissance too long. This contributed to the devastation of Confederate forces at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, from July 1–3, 1863, where General Lee lost the lives of 28,000 soldiers at Union hands, or one-third of his army. A crushed Lee scolds his subordinate general in this vision that is triggered by the crew’s Abrams M1A1 tank meandering through Iraqi deserts (Fig. 7.1). “You are the eyes of this army, and you have left us behind,” the “Old Grey Ghost” Robert E. Lee chastises Stuart (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010, 49). Afterward, as General J. E. B. Stuart himself confides to the tank crew who live over 140 years in the future from that doomed battle, “Thousands of brave boys died, all for naught. . . . Afterwards our struggle become known as the Lost Cause” (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010, 50). This message is taken seriously by the living tank crew, and they work to return to their base near Baghdad. However,



Fig. 7.1 A U.S. Army M1A1 Abrams MBT (Main Battle Tank) from the 35th Regiment during Operation Iraqi Freedom, a model for the one in *Haunted Tank*. (Photo: PDUSG)

all of this does not comprise a “disorder” for General J. E. B. Stuart. Other features of a disorder would include depression, nightmares and complaints of sleeplessness, amnesia, incapacitating depression, dissociation, repetition behaviors, possible substance abuse, and such anxiety that could stop him from functioning—and all that does not happen for our ghost who only wants to fight. However, the usually garrulous and pontificating General J. E. B. Stuart stutters as he faces Sergeant Jamal Stuart now near graphic novel’s end, barely able to recount the truth of why they are related. Does this show guilt? Does it reveal he finally accepts he has violated some code of humanity? Or, does it show a connection to blackness he is ashamed of? The comic leaves it for readers to decode. But Sergeant Jamal Stuart, despite having had his life (and all but one of his tank crew) saved by General J. E. B. Stuart multiple times, does not want to admit any familial connection to his forebear. In a Tarantino-tinted jab, Jamal blasts: “I got a little *White* in me! My *teeth*, my *eyes*, and my *fuckin’ cum!!!* And *that’s it!*” (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010, 17). Jamal does not want to accept any excuses, admissions, apologies, or “I finally saw the Light” moments from his forebear, either. Sergeant Jamal Stuart growls his last words to the apparition of J. E. B. Stuart: “I’m looking forward to never seeing you again, now that our job is done here” (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010). Here the ghost is at his most perceptive and prescient, though. He both offers a Gothic curse but also predicts the actual future. It is not said with malice, but with grim honesty and familiarity to how one trauma-producing conflict always stands ready to bear another. The ghost has the last word. In this comic, the views of the living are almost childishly certain and foolishly hopeful about their tasks in the war. Will Sergeant Jamal Stuart and his crew develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, after killing so many Iraqis (Fig. 7.2), after seeing innocents die in a bus the tank crew blew apart, and upon watching their own crewman perish in front of them? It is unknown. General J. E. B. Stuart knows only this, that more death and psychological suffering will come to Iraq: “Ah feel the seeds of a growing conflict may stall our departure. Opposing factions refusing to back down from their differing beliefs can only lead to one thing ... Civil War” (Marraffino and Flint 2009–2010, 124). The dead general, wrong about so much everywhere else in life and death and the little spaces in between, is at last correct here.



Fig. 7.2 In *Haunted Tank*, an M1A1 Abrams tank destroys Iraqi tanks like this Russian T69 type during OIF. In this real case, it happened at the capable hands of American forces near An Nu'maniyah, Iraq, along Highway 27. (Photo: PDUSG)

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Tom King and Mitch Gerads' *The Sheriff of Babylon* (2015–2016): Contracting, Insurgents, & Dead Policemen

It is revealing that of the well-known graphic novels considered herein, their non-Western cast members speak little. The comic from African-American writer Kyle Baker, *Special Forces*, does give a few words of Islamist slogans from the Black African-national commander of an Al-Qaeda insurgency cell. *Haunted Tank* shares praise to Allah from Syrian mercenaries working for Saddam Hussein who attack the Americans manning an Abrams M1A1 tank, along with a confession from a captured Iraqi soldier who offers to show the tank crew where their enemy hides, an offer not taken. Perhaps they either suspect him of laying a trap or are in a rush to find again their own Coalition tank column. *Army@LOVE* features an “Outer Mongolian” posing as a man of the wilderness, who is actually working on an anthropological film that will include Almas or the Yeti of this Outer Mongolia. It also gives some ominous dialogue with an “Afbaghistani” spy/mistress (and her daughter and mother) of the American war-recruitment director of “Motivation and Morale,” as well as a divided North Korean spy team. But it is writer Tom King (famed for his Batman comics’ story lines) and artist Mitch Gerads’ stellar *The Sheriff of Babylon* that has as many Middle Eastern characters developed and speaking as Western ones, and he gives their motivation, baring their souls and past traumas. In the way the illustrations combine beauty and death, show confusion and loss in the faces, reveal war stress on the body, and love many pages of brooding interrupted by sudden struggle and violence, the

art of Gerads strongly evokes the great cartoon work of Batman comics, from the pens of Alex Toth to John Paul Leon to David Mazzucchelli. However, Gerads admits that his biggest artistic influence is one that I could not have guessed: “Probably not super obvious in my work, but Norman Rockwell. The way he can tell such elaborate stories in a single image really pushes me as an illustrator to do that on every single panel. I’m so much more concerned with storytelling than style” (qtd. in Staff 2016).

King and Gerads’ comic takes us into the mental lands of trauma more fully than most of the graphic novels (save for an unforgettable full page panel in *Haunted Tank* where the tank crew looks at a terrorist-hijacked bus they targeted, which is filled with hapless civilian women and children, now looking barely human after the blasts of the American tank’s cannon barrel). So much in comics is considered brash and over-dramatic and simplistic, and yet comics are an immediate way to invite readers/viewers in to establish their own take on characters’ moods and resolutions simply by gazing on the expressively drawn faces, rendered with sophistication and pain. In this way, readers avoid the trap of textual fiction where a writer tells us what the face looked like, making emotions seem unearned or discoveries on our own cancelled and showing the writer’s hand too much by suggesting through words and obvious direction all the feelings that could be more subtly conjured by a drawing, which can be open to multiple interpretations. *The Sheriff of Babylon* remains an under-examined war noir that works to earn all the emotions felt. It uses Gothic elements to draw its draining and depressing dynamic of attack, vendetta killing, and other revenge acts. The Gothic, like a stabbing victim stuffed into a back alley, bleeds out in these works to where everyone in shock finally sees traces of the crime. The Gothic acts out, though sometimes without any words on a comic’s page, but with potently startling images instead. What is more, irony is a surer force here than in some of the other GWOT media. Many of the people who once killed off members of each other’s family in Iraq must work together with their mortal enemies later—financially, emotionally, or politically. There is a haunting sense that the Iraqis are utterly alone (their family members are dead, so is their old boss, their alliances, and the former Strongman whose decisions once affected them). Only in desperate isolation are these characters at last united.

The American occupation of Iraq in *The Sheriff of Babylon* bands certain former old foes into another cause, and the cycle of violence takes another turn, mimicking the endless real suffering of Iraq before and after the

American-led invasion. Tom King, stunned and mournful over 9/11 during his university years, wanted to do something back then: he decided to join the CIA. Becoming an Operations Officer for the CIA, he served in Iraq from February to July 2004, in part recruiting natives as agents for the American-led forces, and officially would continue to be a CIA agent elsewhere for six more years. Saddam Hussein had been captured in Operation Red Dawn in April 2003 near the dictator's hometown in Tikrit, Iraq, and the insurgency would become fueled in part by former Ba'athist party loyalists who no longer had a fugitive leader but one awaiting trial instead. Holding Iraq for the Americans became a battle against chaos, a disunified country of many different interests and 40 different sectarian groups ready to fight guerrilla-style. This swirl of forces who want to dominate the political scene is the arena the "Sheriff" of the title walks into. There is some debate about who the Sheriff is by critics, but I assume he is Chris Henry, the blond man on the cover who leaves his post as a police detective in San Diego to come instruct Iraqi cadets on becoming efficient police officers in Baghdad, teaching them within the Coalition-controlled Green Zone with its maximum security, yet occasional breaches by both mortars and suicide bombers. The first breach sets the dark and death-laden tone of this gritty graphic novel: within the beginning pages, "Sheriff" Chris Henry sits with a female suicide bomber suspect who has entered the Coalition canteen in the Green Zone. Henry watches in horror as sharpshooters promptly fire upon her as he tries to negotiate and find if she has explosives on her or just a fake vest. After Coalition soldiers riddle her with bullets, no explosion occurs, and no live explosives are found on her corpse. This sense of waste and futility and mystery is echoed by Tom King's initial impression of Baghdad, dropping down to the capital as a CIA operative: "One of the main memories I have is that, by the time I got there—about a year after the invasion—it wasn't about politics anymore. The people there weren't too concerned about the politics, they were just trying to do something right and every time they tried to do exactly that, it fell apart in their hands. Their best intentions led to the worst results" (qtd. in McMillan 2016).

The strikingly divided nature within the veteran law enforcement protagonist Chris Henry (and a predictor of further despair for the war effort) is that he sees himself as a failure from the start of this series, even though he is highly sought by the Coalition Provisional Authority. Back in San Diego, law enforcement supervisors asked him to investigate a Middle Eastern foreign exchange student making threats. Henry let the student

off with a warning. Not long after, the student that Henry merely slapped on the hand took part in hijacking one of the jets on 9/11 into one of the Twin Towers. This sense of missing the target and not preventing disaster is a ghost of guilt that shadows Henry into Iraq. By the first page of the first issue of the 12 issue comic, a body inside the Green Zone lies dead with gunshot head wounds beneath the Hands of Victory (Fig. 8.1), or the giant sculpture of hands with locked swords that Iraqi troops used to parade under during Saddam Hussein’s reign. This would be just one more lifeless body no one knows what to do with in a country whose civil war has produced upward of 207,000 deaths by violence since 2003 (Watson Institute 2022). But the dead individual is identified as Ali Al Fahar, one of the new cadets under the Coalition Provisional Authority



Fig. 8.1 At Baghdad’s Ceremony Square rise the “Hands of Victory” (here pictured next to an M1A1 tank during Operation Iraqi Freedom). Constructed near the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the arms and hands are modeled from Saddam Hussein’s own. Beneath the arms are helmets from dead Iranian soldiers. Formed from the melted firearms of slain Iraqi soldiers, each sword blade weighs 24 tons. This spot or the Swords of Qādisīyah are where the action starts and concludes in *The Sheriff of Babylon*: the finding of a policeman’s body who once worked for American forces. (Photo: PDUSG)

(CPA) that Chris Henry was supposed to teach. Any killing of police cadets is a threat to the new order the Americans are hoping to bring, and so solving it in the graphic novel becomes a high priority, a noirish search for the killer or killers of Al Fahaar. However, this is not just a criminal thriller, or revenge quest, but an attempt (at first) to secure discipline and more safety near the Green Zone and to make a well-publicized example of prosecuting the killers. To explore trauma, as well as the treacherous nature of life and political relationships during the interim Iraq occupation, King reaches for a detective story frame. "The easiest thing you can do as a writer is," says King with admirable humility, "you create a world that's interesting and you want to explore that world, so you create a murder mystery. That's the oldest plot—you have this murder mystery, and as they try and solve this murder, they explore this world" (qtd. in McMillan 2016).

Answers to murder mysteries in a combat zone often are abetted by interrogations. We have already looked at violent interrogations in earlier chapters. Although GWOT storytelling media will not often show this, it is impressive and illustrative of so much that actual interrogators get life-saving and secret cell-busting results not through beatings and humiliations of detainees, but through understanding. A sterling example I offer is Staff Sergeant Eric Maddox whose 2003 interrogations would lead to Operation Red Dawn's capture of ousted President Saddam Hussein, hiding in an Ad-Dawr, Iraq, spider hole that he was pulled from on December 13, 2003. The location of what the U.S. Military called "High Value Target Number 1" was found without physical violence. As Sergeant Maddox remembers of his coup in intelligence work, "If you're torturing somebody, then you're just stupid" (qtd. in Janssen 2019). One of the greatest missions of the Iraq War—the capture of "High Value Target Number 1"—was executed with "no trigger pulling, no drone strikes, no enhanced interrogation methods" (qtd. in Janssen 2019). This sergeant who would win the Legion of Merit medal had a "secret weapon for helping pinpoint Hussein's exact location [that] was much sneakier: He used empathy" in over 300 interrogations (qtd. in Janssen 2019). This empathic method of interrogation is almost never used in comics, and indeed it would be the opposite of that used in the later real-life scandalous abuses that justifiably consumed the media and regrettably drove new anti-Western terrorism: the grotesque abuses of Abu Ghraib. Before a wholly non-lethal view of Sergeant Maddox is cast, though, we should remember his mistakes, as well. We recall one intelligence gathering method of his

that is mimicked by a Naval Criminal Investigative Service operative named only “Bob” in *The Sheriff of Babylon*. There Bob deposits the hated and still living police cadet Ali Al Fahar in a neighborhood outside the Green Zone with multiple witnesses and gives him a stack of U.S. dollars, marking Al Fahar as an informant for the Americans, and an easy sectarian-violence target for neighborhood toughs. What reveals the moral complexities and mistakes of interrogation is Sgt. Maddox’s confession of frustration, which could lead to another’s murder: “If I really got upset with a prisoner, I could cause them more problems than torture,” Maddox noted (qtd. in Janssen 2019). “If a prisoner really wanted me to hurt them, I would start spreading rumors around the town and the prison that they’re the ones who are being cooperative” (qtd. in Janssen 2019). In other words, much violence happened in the real life of the post-Saddam Hussein era, as well as in *The Sheriff of Babylon*, by people becoming too intimately associated with the American invaders—and that was the goal of the Americans in such cases: murder by association. But successes outweighed failures (unlike they do in Chris Henry’s case in *The Sheriff of Babylon*) for Staff Sergeant Eric Maddox. Maddox would continue to find other major targets later in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, even if everything after was an anti-climax: “You get Saddam Hussein,” Sgt. Maddox muses, “your career has peaked” (qtd. in Janssen 2019). Similarly, the author of this comic Tom King would continue CIA counterterrorism operations applied to Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere for another six years, retiring finally (his official story goes) when his wife was expecting a baby.

When we look at the main cast of American characters in these GWOT comics, we can start finding some patterns and reflections to society writ large. First, we see opportunist entrepreneurial types (who have looks of Anglo National Football League quarterbacks—confident, square jawed, cocky, and affirmative of the constant “constant winner” ethos of Director Healey in *Army@LOVE*, including the too-sure-of-himself NCIS operative Bob, the CIA operative of smooth Arabic language skill named only Franklin, and the rugged and unnamed American general). These figures in their optimism are as heady as the ghost of the historic General J. E. B. Stuart who helpfully haunts their tank as it spins lost in the Iraqi sands, miles behind its unit in *The Haunted Tank*, and are able to withstand Syrian mercenaries’ attacks. We see the Oz figures operating the war funding and theatre and profiting off it with their connections to boards of trustees on corporations. These would be like Cal Baker in Wolcott Wheeler and Spain Rodriguez’s 9/11 comic *Dies Irac: One Man Against*

the American Empire (Wheeler and Rodriguez 2003/2018), the mysterious operator behind the “The Freedom Foundation” in Washington, D.C., who bears a spiritual and physical likeness to President Bush-era Vice-President Dick Cheney. An equivalent of a master-on-the-ground in the Green Zone is a U.S. Senator on tour in *The Sheriff of Babylon* (who is drawn in the blended likeness of President George W. Bush and the Provisional Coalition Administrator Paul Bremer, appointed as envoy to Iraq after the war by President Bush himself). This senatorial figure is guided by one of the governing consul members, Saffiya (Sofia) al Aqani to a torture site enjoyed by Uday Hussein, one of Saddam Hussein’s more sadistic sons. Al Aqani tells the Senator: “These lion cages were used as a punishing method by Saddam’s son ... He would sit there in this chair you see here and watch the horror of Iraqis ... My people in these cages” (King and Gerads 2018, 144). The memory of al Aqani creates a flashback image (a full-page splash) of a sunglass wearing Uday in boxers with an obvious erection blandly watching four lions tear apart three Iraqis below as the Uday absent-mindedly munches a banana. The Senator being regaled of these stories of the Hussein family’s “garden of torturous delights,” safely surrounded by high security himself, is emboldened and exclaims to al Aqani: “We should have this on every channel. People should see this chair, Sofia. Then they’d see what we did here, what America did. *This chair, this here—this* is what the war was about. People should know the chair. Why don’t people know the chair?” (King and Gerads 2018, 146) In the middle of this show of Orientalism decadence that Edward Said long ago warned the West of falling for and perpetuating, images of the despot East and Asiatic cruelty that creates an Other in our mind, al Aqani takes a call from her lover, the Sheriff, the man she calls her “Cowboy,” Chris Henry. These scenes, however factual they may be, coalesce in the American imagination (of the Senator and others) with frights from carnivorous animals in other Middle Eastern productions, from *The Arabian Nights* to William Beckford’s *Vathek*. Suddenly, I sense, in the Senator’s mind, any U.S. sacrifice of blood & treasure, any American violation of human rights, and any Coalition collateral damage during combat seems excusable if done in the name of defeating the grotesque and quenchless sadism of Uday Hussain and his demented family.

The Sunni leader Saffiya (Sofia) al Aqani operates as a killer and a double agent, an informant, a puppet master, and an avenger of her father and her grandfather, who with Saddam Hussein helped to found the Ba’athist political movement. She is a powerful woman invested with problem-solving authority (for hospitals, the military, and the politicians) who has

long been outside of the country, and King has admitted to being attracted to her, for her hardness, vulnerability, entanglements, and wish to be pregnant (in the comic, she loses the baby who we may assume to be Chris Henry's). "Sofia's my favorite character. I love her" (qtd. in Inman 2018), King confesses, and we understand once we read of her. Al Aqani's grandfather was later purged and executed on live television, and Saffiya is the last of her family to survive. Her connection is with the other major figure in the comic, Nassir Al Maghreb, who was the highest ranking Shiite police official during the rule of Saddam Hussein. A renowned interrogator, Nassir was ordered by Saddam Hussein in *The Sheriff of Babylon* to question and torture members of al Saffiya al Aqani's family. When Nassir turns on Saddam Hussein, he supplies vital target coordinates to al Aqani, as she is working with the Americans as the "Coalition of the Willing" war against Iraq begins. (In real life, Sergeant Maddox was able to get Saddam Hussein's bodyguard's personal driver to turn on his client, following three months of interrogations [Janssen 2019].) Nassir offers bull's eyes to the Americans' bombers despite the tragedy that Nassir's home is bombed by American jets, and all three of his daughters die from the blasts. Al Aqani had—by accident or design—switched the coordinates to the Americans, reversing status what were considered safe houses. So ample distrust and sorrow and trauma (caused by Nassir and Saffiya) emerge between these figures, and yet they are all called on to solve the mystery of who killed the Iraqi police cadet, not realizing he was sent to his death by an NCIS official. What is more remarkable is that unbeknownst to The "Sheriff" Chris Henry, al Aqani and Nassir—after all the bloodshed between them—partner on the execution of new vendettas. Al Aqani delivers three American soldiers accused of raping one of her cousins at a Ra'had Road military checkpoint, and Nassir simply tells his wife about this task of execution: "I am the servant of our great leader, Saddam Hussein, But where is our great leader, Saddam Hussein? I am a servant of America, our savior. But where is America, our savior? I am police, a man of the law, but there is no law" (King and Gerads 2018, 23). One of the most haunting lines of anyone in this comic because of its direction-less plea and the vision of his dead daughter remains Nassir's: "I follow Muhammad, but I do not know where he has walked" (King and Gerads 2018, 23). All this happening as our introduction to Nassir. He then goes into his basement and kills the three U.S. soldiers with a pistol execution-style, and no one ever connects the crime to him. On the other hand, the Americans are seeking a foreign enemy for the death of an Iraqi Coalition Provisional Authority Police

trainee, when it is paradoxically an American security official who wanted revenge on the cadet for giving the NCIS deliberately wrong information that would lead to the nighttime raid and shooting of people gathered at an underground Christian church near Baghdad. The eeriness and violent nightmare of the comic is compounded when King pledges that he remembers parts of Baghdad where similar acts and betrayals happened in real life, and he wants to show them yet cover his tracks because of the vow he took to work in the CIA: “There’s a responsibility to get this right. Yes, 100 percent. Every location except for one comes from a place I’ve actually been to—and now I’m horribly afraid people are going to find out where that one actually is. The soldiers and the Iraqis and the people who actually went through this, to present them as they were and as heroic as they were and as horrible as they were, it’s important to make sure that’s all true” (qtd. in McMillan 2016).

From a CIA operative’s perspective, then, a graphic novel is crafted establishing that of the billions of dollars spent, the trust broken in Iraq, the lies told back in the United States, the cultures disrupted, the peoples displaced, the homes ruined, and the lives injured or killed, nothing much involving spycraft in this volume has value. Distressing and disquieting in the extreme, the surveillance, identification of foes and networks, reconnaissance, and interrogations are misused and abused. Informants use defamation for killing of enemies. Secret monitoring is used for blackmail by security agencies. Money and suspects are exchanged for double-crossing. All ends not with peace-keeping and unity formation, but with a bang in the faces of the invaders. All that suffering noted, King still vows, “I hung out with Special Forces guys. I hung out with big army guys. I hung out with military contractors that spent their whole life in the army and then came over after that. . . . I wish I was back there, I wish I was still in it—and pain that came with it” (qtd. in Inman). I would say that the post-traumatic stress that King suffers is a different kind than many of the characters we have dissected. His unhealed wound is that he misses the intensity of serving in a place where one mistake finishes you and one smart decision saves scores of lives—where every day is all or nothing. For a CIA spook in Iraq, says King remembering back nostalgically, “You were on the edge of the world and when you pushed it, it moved. Then you come back to your normal life and you’re doing your thing, you’re writing comics for a living and watching the news, and you don’t feel important anymore” (qtd. in Inman 2018). This might be the most important insight to hold to as we examine later video games and film of the GWOT: “It’s

not always about the horror. It's not always about thinking you're going to get shot. It's sort of about the difference between a life where you thought you were making a difference and a life where you weren't" (qtd. in Inman 2018). The other undeniable Gothic reality in this fiction is that the best spies from *The Sheriff of Babylon* are not even human. So what secret agent in *The Sheriff of Babylon* does have any success?

What leads us to parlors where money exchanges and bedrooms where truths are traded, and travels to those plazas and homes where exploded or power drill-tortured bodies wait for discovery and identification are the swishing tails of Baghdad's legion of cats.

Just as military historians say that the two generals that traditionally have won wars against invaders of Mother Russia (whether Napoleon's armies or Hitler's) are the months of December and January, so the first responders and the neighborhood spies that never disappoint the Iraqi people with their dependable presence are those partners with the night, the quintessential Gothic animal, the common housecats. Though it has received apparently no critical attention for its weird presence in *The Sheriff of Babylon*, the cat is the being to watch most carefully throughout its pages.

Obedying only their feline nature, the cats prowl the Green Zone. They are given free reign, the Sheriff says, because none of the modern methods Americans bring in to keep out the rats and mice work. Thus, at least one cat is always shown at most of the most significant locales of the book. A cat approaches the Sheriff to be rubbed and eat from Chris Henry's hand from where the suspected suicide bomber girl was, and later a cat is near where an American contractor posing as a CIA chief is found in the canteen, and later discovered dead near the Hands of Victory at Baghdad's Grand Festivities Square at book's end. A cat witnesses the Sheriff show to Nassir's wife a priceless carved figure of the first woman, stolen from one of Iraq's museums of pre-Islamic art. She throws the figure into an empty swimming pool at one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, and the cat scampers over to the art sculpture, taking the figured carved head into its jaws, taking back Iraq's history.

Cats appear more in this book than any other GWOT storytelling media. They linger where people died, even feeding off the dead flesh, yet are unable to be killed themselves in the book. When the Sheriff and Nassir arrive at the home of the family of the Iraqi police cadet to ask questions concerning any known enemies, they find that the whole family of the cadet has been shot to death, and their bodies are strewn throughout

the apartment. A black-and-white cat nimbly leaps from body to body, escaping round after round of bullets the Sheriff and Nassir shoot at its body. At each shot, the cat seems to disappear, the animal that has feasted on their bodies, until we find him quite alive in the book's last pages, again by a dead body. The cat considers a juicy bite of well-marbled American flesh from the fat American contractor. The cats almost seem like regenerated spirits of the dead in this volume, as they so promptly and weirdly show up wherever and whenever someone perishes.

It is curious that until 2007, it was widely thought the origin of domestic cats was in Egypt 4000 years ago. Studies have begun to show mitochondrial DNA markers, however, manifesting that domestication of cats did not occur there, but in the lands of modern Iraq: starting in Mesopotamia "approximately 12,000 BCE at about the same time as dogs, sheep, and goats" (Mark 2012). Therefore, the modern domestic cat was "bred by Mesopotamian farmers, most probably as a means of controlling, pests, such as mice, which were attracted by grain supplies" (Mark 2012), roughly where this comic takes place. It is also thought that wild cats "have lived among the people of Mesopotamia over 100,000" years ago (Mark 2012). These cats in actual Baghdad, and those prowling around *The Sheriff of Babylon*, are the descendants who prowled around Babylon's Gate of Ishtar built for King Nebuchadnezzar II circa 575 BCE, in the kingdom that was the cradle of civilization. Felines are nearly mythological in their presence in Arab poetry and stories and have an uncanny presence in this comic, as well. A rich source on the resonance of cats for Middle Eastern stories comes from the Egyptian co-founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, whose ideas continued to empower sectarian struggle in Iraq. As serious a writer of Qutb was on America and the Middle East, he is also known to have composed poetry for his dying cat, Susu. In *A Child from the Village*, his tender memoir of life in Egypt written in 1946 "just prior to Qutb's conversion to the Islamist cause," he went further and wrote: Growing up, "it was forbidden to strike a black cat during the day, or any cat at night, because it might be an 'afreet' or else the soul of one of those humans who could roam apart from their bodies" (Qutb 2016). This sense that a cat is the soul of a human reminds us that cats are ubiquitous in Gothic literature, painting, and film. They are chased, tortured, arousing guilt, and haunting a protagonist in Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843). In another tale, a kitten's mother avenges her offspring after the American narrator drops pebbles on it in Bram Stoker's "The Squaw" (Stoker 1914/2019). A most

detached cat looks into fallen and falling souls within Mikhail Bulgakov's Gothic-inflected *The Master and Margarita* (Bulgakov 1966/2019). In Lovecraft's "The Cats of Ulthar" (Lovecraft 1920/2017), the Uhltharian felines want revenge on an old couple who torture them; in his "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath" (Lovecraft 1926/2017), cats rescue the hero from the nightmare landscape he plods in, while within his "The Rats in the Walls" (Lovecraft 1923/2017), it is the narrator's pet cat (first hearing the rats in the walls) who witnesses the narrator become a cannibal, and so the cat rips away at his throat (an act we will see represented in *The Sheriff of Babylon*). In Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (King 1983), a family pet cat named Church comes back from the dead when buried in a timeless burial spot, and the same is tried with the toddler in the family of Louis Creed. Finally, in Neil Gaiman's comic, *The Price* (Gaiman and Zulli 2005), a cat can see the demons his master cannot and saves his life. All this Gothic literature reflected upon, from England to Russia to the United States, it still seems that the Egyptian Qutb's insight that cats are dead souls casts the brightest light on *The Sheriff of Babylon*. Perhaps Qutb's insight is best abetted by an insight from France, especially Baudelaire's 1847 poem, "The Cats." The felines in that poem have been eloquently critiqued by Katharine M. Rogers in that poem as both "capable of fervent sexuality and solitary quietude; they are drawn to silence and the deepest darkness; they could serve as messengers from Erebus if their pride could be subdued to servitude; ... Their fertile loins are filled with magic fire, and their eyes are flexed with gold" (Rogers 2001). People are found abducted, tortured, and shot, and their bodies repeatedly dumped inside the green zone in *The Sheriff of Babylon*, but there is not one dead cat in the whole book. Messengers of their own, no one is listening in this graphic novel of revenge and retaliation to what the cats are "saying." Philosopher John Gray within his *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life* observes cats in war scenarios and goes further: "Obeying their nature, they are content with the life it gives them. ... With predictably tragic and farcical results, the human animal never ceases striving to be something that it is not. Cats make so such effort" (2020, 2). While "Much of human life is a struggle for happiness," Gray attests, with cats "happiness is the state to which they default when practical threats to their well-being are remove" (2020, 2). Neither burdened nor eager nor wishing the impossible, they suggest everything that the Americans in this graphic novel, the living and the dead, are not.

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PART IV

Films



Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005): Vigilantism, Poison, & Mad Doctors

THE RAT, THE CAT, AND THE BAT

The identification of Batman with the Gothic is well established from its first incarnation, a fifteen-episode Lambert Hillyer-directed theatrical serial from 1943 entitled simply, *Batman*. This orphaned superhero without any super abilities (but abundant super agilities) lives in a bat cave with a portly servant Alfred and, because of its nearness in release to World War II, chases a spy mastermind in Gotham sponsored by the Imperial Government of Japan, one Dr. Daka. As Batman evolves in later films, he operates in a civically corrupt and morally diseased Gotham plagued by a menagerie of weird villains or “dirty rats.” Some of the menaces have preternatural capabilities like strutting Catwoman’s feline gymnastic prowess and her nine lives shown off as she jumps off Gotham’s rooftops; other villains seem to be freakish animal–human hybrids like the Penguin. Batman is, like many traditional Gothic characters, an orphan. Bruce Wayne hails from a family whose mansion is as curious as the family’s only half-buried past (including hints of madness among female relatives long hushed up), suggested physically by tunnels under the mansion. He is a protagonist who has a severely divided self and who operates at night beyond the law. Most curiously, his totem animal once terrorized the hero (the same recurring emblem of the ultimate Gothic icon in the shadows, Dracula)—the bat or “the rat with wings” as the Riddler will call him in *The Batman* (2022). The bat is the stealthy nighttime image the

protagonist hopes will scare criminals, and bats now follow him into action as if by mysterious bonding or unspoken supernatural command. Outside of the rat and the raven, the bat has a storied connection to the Gothic, as seen in *Gothic Animals* (2020), though it is curiously absent from Derrida's rich *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009) where foxes rule, and such perplexing questions are raised such as, Can bestiality ever actually be occurring "if both [sexual parties] are animals?" An easier question is what can terrify us about a bat? Perhaps its gargoyle-like hideous shape, its face used as endless inspiration for devils in medieval art, the uncannily weird way it flies, and its sublime variety. There are 1400 species of bats in existence, the second most populous mammal on earth, dwarfed only by the world's estimated 14 billion rats according to *World Atlas*.

What makes the bat an ironic yet suitable totem for Bruce Wayne is the bats have almost no natural predators. Wayne has predators coming after him, but few seem successful in ever fully understanding or destroying him. As for bats, the only killers are disease, starvation, accident, human gathering for laboratories, or old age. For our time, bats have been repeatedly proposed as carriers of disease (or holding a virus that would be altered by scientists), including a variety of SARS engulfing Wuhan, China, in late 2019 (a place I naively toured twice in December 2019, including its wet markets, while university-teaching in China), decimating our species and changing our economies, politics, cultures, mental health, and social habits. Yet the positives of bats cannot be outweighed, and benefits range from pollination to insect control: one bat may devour 2000 mosquitos in an hour, including mosquitoes carrying malaria. Misunderstood bats, like the misunderstood Master Wayne, also live in hidden places, abandoned mine shafts, mountain caves, and bridges. Flying somewhere above us as twilight lowers her curtain, they are an operatic animal with sudden appearances, screams, plunges, and those eye-catching, sublime wings—like Batman himself and the characters from opera he watched once long ago as a boy with his parents, the Italian librettist-composer Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele* (1868), before they were shot down in a Gotham alley. New species are found occasionally, like new transmedia iterations of Batman himself, and among those new ones, we see that bats like to dress up in eye-candy color. A newly discovered bat from 2018 has Halloween colors and was found in Guinea's Nimba mountains, with blaze orange fur and coal black wings (Machemer 2021). In wardrobe, Batman now has serious competition, namely *Myotis Nimbaensis*.

In his discussion of the Gothic lives of bats, Fred Francis explores these hidden creatures as an overview and with fresh insight for Batman in a

chapter whose title restates the prime question of Bruce Wayne's: "What Do I Use to Make Them Afraid? ..." (2020). It is curious that when Frank Miller's Batman is pondering in a 1987 comic what symbol he can use, as Francis reminds us, a furry bat promptly bashes into Bruce Wayne's window and flops onto a statue in front of him, as if served by God or the Devil. *Voila*: the only extant mammal who developed its forelimbs as wings and is capable of sustained flight, some bats flying up to 200 miles. The core of Batman comics and films, as Mark Fisher understands them, is "the pressing of Gothic Fear into the service of heroic Justice" (2006). "No inconsiderable feat" that, Alan Moore once mused in an introduction to *The Dark Night Returns* four-issue comic book (1986), when asked about giving Batman true darkness and fearsomeness when his antics and his foes still were so theatrical and their harm not "so serious" as the Joker might have said in the older Batmedia. But with the gravity of Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's comic *The Killing Joke*, the Joker's pregnant wife Jeannie perishes in an accident, and later the Joker ends up shooting Batgirl in the spine, paralyzing her, raping her, and taunting her father with naked pictures of the act and her trussed body (Moore and Bolland 1988). Then Christopher Nolan's films would strive to strip the frequent humor broadsides, campiness, and lack of meditation on the hero's struggle and doubts that trivialized previous comics and TV (from the Batman show of 1966–1968) and even some of the richer films (including Tim Burton's). The Batman of the past stressed the villains' capers: the works were about sensationalizing them and keeping the audience attuned to their flamboyant ways. But Nolan, mimicking Commissioner James Gordon lighting the Bat Signal, wanted in all his trilogy to develop the complicated nature of heroism. I would argue that Nolan attempted to draw the character of Batman more fully than any director ever did before him.

THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY

When Warner Brothers studio production executives green lit Christopher Nolan (with a \$150 million budget) to direct a new *Batman* movie, a director not yet 33 years old who only had 3 features under his cinematic belt (*Following*, *Memento*, and *Insomnia*), they were taking bold chances with what may seem to us unfathomable sums. According to the Blu-Ray *The Dark Knight Trilogy Special Features*, in the early 2000s, Jeff Robinov (then President of Warner Brothers Picture Group) and Greg Silverman (then the chief of production at Warner Brothers) listened to Christopher

Nolan's pitch—a mere “ten to fifteen” minutes—and they were immediately sold (Nolan 2013, 2:30–2:45). Nolan was interested in the origin story of Bruce Wayne, saw a gap in popular culture terms that previous films and comics never addressed, and marketed it to Warner's top officials (Nolan 2013, 2:30–2:45). From such a seemingly slender yet concentrated pitch came the trilogy that would satisfy critics worldwide and net over \$2.3 billion from audiences (Fig. 9.1). Silverman then took it with absolute affirmation of success to the rest of the Warner team, and they assented. Oddly enough, there was oddly never a sense it could be a failure. Director of *Superman* (1978) Richard Donner has called *Batman*, one of the few great “American fables” (2:30–2:45). Yet the Warner president and chief of production handed over this prestige American intellectual property that millions of people including myself grew up with to a London-born filmmaker of only three features, all a testament to the arresting power of Nolan's vision.

Filmmaker Jules Chin Greene in *Screen Rant* makes an ironclad case for *Batman* as a Gothic detective hero operating in a Gothic nightmare of city corruption (2022). Some creators like Grant Morrison and Klaus Janson have even called their DC comic starting in 1990, *Batman Gothic*, and it



Fig. 9.1 Christopher Nolan (left) and his Dark Knight Trilogy collaborator and brother Jonah Nolan, who cowrote the second and third films. (Screenshot: The Dark Knight Trilogy Special Features Blu-ray)

does feature an unkillable, paranormal villain; a satanic pact; and an intriguing glimpse of young Master Wayne's traumatic childhood (Morrison and Janson, 1990). More intriguingly, Randall Jensen, in labeling the Caped Crusader as a complex Gothic protagonist, directs us to "the architecture of Gotham cityscape" that Batman chooses to operate in, along with "the pervasive presence of fear, the unknown, and the uncanny [and ...] movement of the past into the present" (2008, 92). Sensitive to this movement, Antonio Sanna posits how "Gothic tales often linger on the characters' memories of a traumatic and shattering encounter, of an unwanted epiphany. In the case of Batman, the return of the past and the reenactment of trauma are primarily related to witness[ing] the murder of his parents when he was a boy" (2015, 34). Sanna identifies the re-creation of the parental deaths in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), Director Sam Liu's animation *The Killing Joke* (2016), Tim Burton's two directed Batman films, and the 1992–1995 television show, *Batman: The Animated Series*. This is a voluntary repetition by filmmakers of a traumatic memory that is an unstoppable intrusion for Bruce Wayne, which will hamper his development and attachment, I would argue, especially in Director Matt Reeves' *The Batman* (2022), which we will explore later. All the aforementioned films and television series, Sanna rightly contends, "linger on the repetitiveness of the traumatic event in the protagonist's mind by means of involuntary flashbacks, precisely as is the case of many persons who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (2015, 34). And when an establishing shot from *Batman Begins* will place Wayne at center of a vast flying colony of bats, I would agree that this scion of Gotham, as Sanna detects, "has become one with the surrounding dark environment and its nocturnal inhabitant—an animal that can be barely tamed by human beings and is often associated in the popular imaginary with witchcraft and the occult... . Blurring the difference between himself and what he previously perceived as a 'hostile' Other" (2015, 35). It is seduction by the Other and a becoming the Other, an embrace of Fear. As Miguel Aguirre intuited in his discussion of famed Gothic works from Poe, Shelley, Stevenson, Hawthorne, Radcliffe, Le Fanu, Beale, Machen, and Bierce, such fateful encounters have an uncanny sense to them, unreal yet too real: someone has lost his or her "power of self-differentiation. ... The Victorian mind fears to accept the Other, ... and yet it knows that this dread Other is more real than what the rational world offers" (1998, 212). All of this connects to Bruce Wayne's growing attraction to manifesting

the state of awe amid Gotham that he roams, that place of towering buildings and Gothic windows, a zone cathedralesque and ever ready to reveal ruin. Sanna develops how “precisely like monsters and inimical supernatural creatures, Batman’s appearance and behaviour are intended to stimulate the visceral response of his victims, to reach their bodies. . . . The caped crusader behaves precisely like a horror film’s monster or serial killer, turning off the lights in the areas where his victims are, attacking them from hidden and unexpected positions and dragging them into darkness” (Sanna 2015, 39).

Christopher Nolan and his co-writer brother Jonah Nolan perfected Batman as a Gothic figure looming, brooding, hovering, waiting to drop from a tower and visit disaster to his deserving prey, and this may be our vicarious dark delight with this divided figure. While in the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a fever in America for finishing model kits of warplanes, racing cars, battleships, and famed buildings, my key interest then was those models of Batman—and all his gear, including the machine guns, cannons, and grappling hooks nested on his Batpod. I remember making many highly detailed models of Batman in action as a kid, getting slightly high off the glue and paint as they had so many tiny parts that kept falling into our plush carpet. Some kits like the Batmobile, which I watched zoom about from the 120 episodes of the 1966–1968 campy TV series, were especially detailed. I recall making an acrobatic 14-inch tall Batman who had been flying and now landed with one hand on a lightning-blasted tree out in a place looking suspiciously like the Borgo Pass, a mountain passage mysteriously far from the lights and asphalt of Gotham. What was he doing there in this most Gothic setting? A model of masked Catwoman in a desolate place was finished next. What was she doing not stretching herself out of a high window after yet another big-time jewelry heist from an unwary Empire State socialite? There they were across from each other on my shelf, possibly only meeting when the lights dimmed. Always together, yet not touching enough, as in the life of the comics, TV, and movies (though touching more in the streaming series). No non-alien superhero, save perhaps for Tony Stark’s Iron Man, have so much irresistible accoutrement as Batman. As children, we can play with the models and dress as the Batverse’s characters at Halloween. Somehow, the Gothic spell recharges for us as adults, where we can fly to Culver City, California, at Warner Brothers’ Studios, and inspect Batman’s actual vehicles from the films, and Catwoman’s motorcycles. Above all characters in comics, his world creates a tactile hunger in us to touch the Batgadgets and Batvehicles and to enter this world of quick movements of shadows rushing past

shadows. Though America has no ancient castles of Gothic gloom, the super-rich of the Gilded Age tried to build their own: completing bastardized models from older cultures, the Americans concocted their own shadowy Gotham. One of America's earliest Gothic writers Washington Irving mused on such a place two centuries ago and its Gothically dualistic nature, and the lasting nickname he would give it: "This city of Gotham ... This same New York, though the most charming, pleasant, polished, and praiseworthy city under the sun ... [yet the] most shockingly ill-natured and sarcastic, and wickedly given to all manner of backslidings; for which we are very sorry" (Irving 1807, 183–184). As Irving knew instinctively, there is something about the city of Gotham that is always about something else: it is American striving, but it is also a deplorable place of poverty, crime, hidden sin and corruption of Hawthornian foulness among the most powerful elites. There is always something about Batman that is also constantly about something else: he is a crimefighter, but he is a violent vigilante; he is an orphan, and yet avoids emotional attachments that could reassure and give more security. Always sought by women, he gives his hand to none (for long). He is a member of the one percent and his family has made money off weaponry systems (according to Slavoj Žižek's interpretation, at least [Žižek 2010/2011]), but he seems to care about the impoverished and the weak (though China Miéville contests that). He is the famous playboy everyone knows by sight who will accompany at least two young women to a social function and fall into a hotel fountain with them to cavort, play, souse with spray, and laugh as the guests gawk and gasp in *Batman Begins*, and yet almost no one there can place him once in his Batsuit. He is the most strangely alluring figure in Gothic comics, with a charisma and inner tension most superhero, fantasy, or Gothic figures cannot duplicate.

During an interview I conducted with Guillermo del Toro (for a work in progress entitled *Mad About Monsters*, a lavish book on pop culture items of the 1960s and 1970s that were fearsome, creepy, or gorgeously loathsome, especially model kits), I noted his interest in the Batman fascination of that era as well as the present one, and we swapped stories about Batkits. Elsewhere del Toro takes my understanding and appreciation much further. On thinking over the Caped Crusader for another venue, he muses, "We live in the twenty-first century, and our Ulysses or Achilles are Batman and Superman for many of us. Those were the sagas that we took to heart. Growing up with mythology like that, reading the comics of Batman, you hear your own Batman" (Nolan 2013, 14:10–14:20). Del

Toro notes that with Batman, we hear what we want to hear: “Through that narrative we process the world. It is like a religion. Each man has his own Jesus, you know. Your Jesus can be vengeful and righteous, and my Jesus can be forgiving and loving. And there’s no right Jesus [laughs Guillermo del Toro] in the same way that there’s no right Batman” (Nolan 2013, 14:20–14:30). A hundred books analyze Batman, and still after reading them, we seem to want more answers to the riddles in the Batman’s motivations, traumas, revenge, guilt over wealth, and inability to stop deaths of those he loves. To use “each man’s” Batman and Gotham to explore themes from the real world now like corruption and governance, justice and peace, terrorism and punishment, greed and class divide is ambitious, but Christopher Nolan’s cast and crew admirably met the challenges throughout the trilogy. Nolan’s Batman was not a figure to laugh at, as the genial Adam West would give viewers in William Dozier’s and Lorenzo Semple Jr.’s *Batman* on television from 1966–1968. If audiences were to have a character with a Byronic appeal and Gothically tortured soul, *Batman Begins*’ Casting Directors John Papsidera and Lucinda Syson knew they had to select an actor who could radiate the sexual magnetism, walk with the aura of one who has suffered multiple traumas, and hold the moral complexity and personal hidden anguish from youth that is within a Gothic Batman. Moreover, these Heads of Casting, along with Director Nolan, had to choose the actor who could become two people in one, exploring Batman’s Gothic dualism of rescuer and avenger. Several actors performed casting trials to play Batman himself, absorbing to watch on the Blu-ray of *The Dark Knight Trilogy* as we consider what they would have brought to the role (including Liam Neeson and Cillian Murphy, who would end up being cast as the villains Ra’s al Ghul and Dr. Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow, respectively, instead). One of the reasons that Director Christopher Nolan might have chosen Welsh-born actor Christian Bale was that Bale could quickly and convincingly become two men, suggesting outwardly that dualism, as we can see from him in the role’s try-outs. Video analysis shows that Bale improvised during casting tests with a gravelly voice as Batman, in contrast to his whisky smooth voice of charming Bruce Wayne. Constructing and intuiting like an “emotional mathematician” as del Toro puts it (Nolan 2013), Christopher Nolan would build philosophical and moral labyrinths for his characters, pushing Bale’s Bruce Wayne to the center of the psychological maze. Nolan would give us what other films had not dared: going to Wayne’s traumatized earliest stages and then showing him as a young adult facing ethical and moral decisions.

ORPHANS AND GHOSTS

Gothic fiction and Gothic film gravitate toward orphans and foundlings. If no one else takes in the lost children and studies their plight, the Gothic media will, and such waifs are everywhere. The parentless jump across the chasm of time from Eleanor Sleath's *The Orphan of the Rhine* (1798; listed in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* as part of the gang of seven "Horrid" novels) to Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*; from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to Lemony Snicket's (aka Daniel Handler's) *A Series of Unfortunate Events* to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*; from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* to Ransom Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived at the Castle* to Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* to Elizabeth Brooks' *The Orphan of Salt Winds*. Because we see orphans mostly later in their age in many literary works, and they have tried to adapt in whatever way they can, it is easy to not remember how many of the characters we analyze in Gothic literature have lost their parents. Margarita Georgieva, in her reflective *The Gothic Child* (2013), provides an in-depth and fascinating study of what happens to the nature of children in these works (and any of their naivete or innocence) when they lose their parents, asking if they stop being children themselves. I believe that eight-year-old Bruce Wayne loses his innocence and sense of fairness in the world early on, but not the memory of what it is for people to feel pain and his idealism in changing this world to the better for them. In one of the comics, he kneels by his bed and makes a prayer vow to fight criminals. A November 1939 comic book of little Bruce tells us, he will "avenge" his parents' deaths "by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals."

Still, surprisingly, no Batman comic book, film, or TV series had detailed in depth with the primal trauma of deepest wound from youth. This is not necessarily linked to the famous "primal scene" of parents seen or imagined to be having sex and interpreted by the child as an attack by the father, but instead a "painful situation to which an individual was subject in early life that is presumed to be the basis of a neurosis in later life" ("Primal Trauma" 2022, *APA Dictionary*). The primal trauma, instead, is the sudden separation forever with his parents. In the debut of Batman from *Detective Comics* #27 (appearing in March 1939), there is no mentioning of his becoming an orphan. It was clearly not an interest in that original story, but for this study, it is of primary interest. Only nine months later in *Detective Comics* #33, we learn how Bruce Wayne came to be.

Leaving the movies early, the Wayne family of three encounter a mugger who insists on Bruce's mother's (Martha Wayne's) necklace. (Nolan in appreciating the operatic and flying nature of Batman's story and its villains will change it to Arrigo Boito's 1868 opera, *Mefistofele*, and shoot it on location in London's Garrick Theatre.) Before anyone can register anything, the husband Dr. Thomas Wayne jumps to shield her, and both parents are shot down by the attacker. We do not know how long young Bruce stands there beside their cooling corpses before the Gotham Police Department arrives. As the esteemed "Batologist" Travis Langley has affirmed (several of whose Batman studies are on Amazon's top 100 most popular list for comics interpretation), children who witness their parents' murders tend to manifest emotional "scarring through tantrums, flashbacks, sleep disturbances, anxiety, dissociation, passiveness, and aggression, or with shocking images, thoughts, and memoirs, often finding themselves haunted by the murderer's impulsiveness, ... and their own lack of power" (2022, 38). As a child, then, Bruce Wayne could plausibly fear those words heard from killers in a number of Gothic horror and true-crime stories where someone survives an unbearably violent encounter, "I will come to get you later and finish off the job." This was heard in real life with the well-known 1978 case of the "Mad Chopper," the merchant seaman Lawrence Singleton picking up 15-year-old hitchhiker Mary Vincent in Berkeley—now a victims' advocate—raping her, cutting off her forearms, and throwing her off a cliff. On learning of her survival much later, he vowed to "come to finish the job" (qtd. in Hackett 2003). Sentenced to prison, then released, he would never sense that the sadistic butchery he did warranted any punishment. He would go on to kill another woman in 1997. Mary Vincent used her prosthetic arms for art the same year that *Batman Begins* was begun by Nolan. Her connection with Bruce Wayne lives, for she now draws superheroes (Hackett 2003). This meditation on trauma leads to the question of how much PTSD does Bruce Wayne have, and how controlled he is from the agony of watching his parents die? As an adult, we will have to investigate if he does have some or most of the symptoms of this disorder, and are they debilitating? Adam West, who played Batman during the 1966–1968 TV series and in the 1966 film, went so far as to ask the psychologist Travis Langley if he thought "Batman was crazy?" (2022, 5).

DOCTORS AND FLASHBACKS

The question of why traditional Gothic elements reappear in superhero comics and movies and contemporary American transmedia of the GWOT here may be obvious: they are effectively frightening and involving, and we are in a Gothic age, as Angela Carter noted in the introduction of her *Fireworks* (Carter 1974). The question of how they react with these plots is richer and more complicated and perplexing. One such prominent element in Gothic fiction is The Healer, ironically named. There must be a dozen reasons for healers, or modern witch doctors, to be a primely fascinating and gruesomely effective villain. They may call themselves innovators and pioneers, students of the dark arts, or eugenic cleansers of society. We may think of the ominous physician and mesmerist researchers: Dr. Marbuse, Dr. Caligari, and Dr. Frankenstein. We and society put faith in and admire doctors, trusting and allowing them to do what they say must be done. After all, they have a long training and vast knowledge of plants, of chemistry, and the dosage it takes to do what they wish done; they understand the workings of electrical impulses within the body and outside of it; they can control our moods by asking the right questions, and expose our vulnerabilities with those questions; they can suggest committing us to and then controlling the facility that we find ourselves locked in; and often, whilst examining you, they seem to hold their thoughts to themselves. In brief, they possess an understanding the rest of us do not, of detailed anatomy, of the quickening force of life, and of a surer sense of when death is finally ready to take us. Death is their familiar companion and constant competitor. They can look modest and mild-mannered in a plain white lab coat or a conservative dress or a tie with a pin, and they may not deign to carry a gun, but with one move (an easy spray of a toxic admixture that makes us feel fear, for instance, as with a medical fiend from *Batman Begins*) they become their own kind of scientific supervillain, more galvanizing to us than Dr. Luigi Galvani is to a dead frog (whose electrified “reptilian resurrection” demonstration in a surgical theater would haunt the dreams of Mary Shelley before her creature ever drew breath on the page). Bruce Wayne is in a delicate position with the doctors, in this case, the psychiatrists. And who can say who one should fear more at any moment: the most unregulated patient at the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane who has killed many in fiendish ways (famed for high-profile patients and named after by Gotham’s doctor-benefactor Amadeus Arkham for his deceased mother), or a smugly

smiling, gently condescending attending physician at Arkham Asylum: enter Dr. Jonathan Crane matchlessly played by Cillian Murphy—all aplomb one moment, and seething Scarecrow the next.

Of all the Batverse villains, viewers may first find Dr. Crane a bit anemic, not much of a showman of evil and entropy compared to the Joker, and not endowed with scorching rejoinders to Batman or a memorable philosophy of destruction. As I remember, everyone who was coolly nihilistic quoted the Joker in high school, but not one lonely soul ever referenced the lanky, wonky Jonathan Crane. Gangly Dr. Crane may never have *le mot juste* to a superhero or gain psychological dominance, fear, and trembling in three pithy words by asking, “Why so serious?”. But in a series devoted to trauma, vengeance, and losing one’s mind in a vicious cycle of payback, Dr. Crane is still a pivotal character. Even the Joker knows and respects what mental mayhem Dr. Crane can cause, and how easily, and says it better than the psychiatrist ever could: swinging upside down many stories over Gotham in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker opines “Madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little *push*” (Nolan 2008).

Dr. Jonathan Crane debuted in Autumn 1941 with the *World’s Finest Comics No. 3*. In him I would argue is one of America’s early and most disparaging images of an academic, or more accurately a pedant, a stereotype which has long been a trend in a country fortified with skepticism and suspicion of the highly educated: Ichabod Crane. Arriving in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” to be the local schoolmaster in the countryside surrounding Tarry Town, New York, wiry, gangly, and effete Ichabod Crane falls under the sexual spell of Katrina Van Tassel. He competes with the hypermasculine, country boy brute Abraham “Brom Bones” Van Brunt for her attention. Failing to take her hand in marriage after a ball, Crane departs for his village home through a swamp past midnight and is ill-met by what seems a headless horseman chasing him, perhaps the ghost of a mercenary soldier of the British from the Revolutionary War. What happens to Crane is still a mystery: did the ghost spirit him away by paranormal means, or was the horseman actually Van Brunt, and did Van Brunt simply scare Crane away, or did he kill him and successfully hide the remains? Critics still do not agree on a theory for Ichabod’s end. The point for Batman scholars is that Bruce Wayne’s foe conjures Ichabod Crane in many ways beyond the obvious ones. Like Ichabod, academic Jonathan Crane is long, thin, ominously detached, and embittered. In Jonathan’s case, he was tormented by school rowdies and brought up by a grandmother who liked to chastise him by confining him in an

abandoned chapel where birds would come in from the steeple to peck and poke him like some maimed beetle. This torment plunges him into seeking ways of mental mastery of the outside world. Jonathan Crane's later methods of showing off how to control one's fear, as Travis Langley puts it, includes "firing a gun in class while demonstrating the acquisition of fear" (2022, 81). Then the mentally unsteady Professor Crane also pledges, "Why buy nicer clothes when that money could go into his book collection? ... [Become] a symbol of poverty and fear combined! The Scarecrow!" (81).

The Scarecrow/Dr. Jonathan Crane signifies in the Batverse what the never-caught Anthrax poisoner did in Washington, D.C., West Palm Beach in Florida, Oxford in Connecticut, and New York City in the year of 9/11, which was a cycle of post-traumatic worry to come after the initial terrorism which Derrida diagnosed alarmingly well in "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" (2003). In all those locales between September 18 and October 12, 2001, America was plagued by bioterrorism, concurrent with the GWOT's launch in Afghanistan. Resembling a fraught plot from *Batman*, some person or persons was mailing to prominent and senior government officials—U.S. Senators Chuck Grassley and Arlen Specter, along with U.S. Representatives Rush Holt and Jerrold Nadler—anthrax spores that could kill them or their mail handlers. Curiously and coincidentally to *Batman*, one more Senator was targeted but not killed, Patrick Leahy from Vermont (and President Pro Tempore of the United States Senate in 2022), a lifetime *Batman* comics fan. Indeed, Patrick Leahy more than established his fanboy status by voicing in *Batman: The Animated Series* and acting in *Batman Forever*, *Batman & Robin*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. His toughness in real life during the Anthrax scare in America would be echoed in *The Dark Knight* seven years later where Leahy growls at the knife-wielding Joker who has just invaded a party with Gotham's finest—"We're not intimidated by thugs," to which the Joker threatens, "*You know* ... You remind me of my father. I hated my father" (Nolan 2008). There's enough of a pause to suggest a stabbing might take place. Just as in the movies, formidable Leahy was not felled in real life when 17 people were injured and five would die from the Anthrax poisonings. The identity of the poisoner was never conclusively proven. The FBI fingered Dr. Bruce Edwards Ivins (who wrote his PhD dissertation on how diphtheria toxin is bound, taken up, and expressed to people in 1976). Dr. Ivins had means and motive and opportunity, according to the

FBI. Dr. Ivins (who had a history of mental illness and making threats to people and assault them, according to the FBI) directed an anthrax lab developing a vaccine to anthrax poisoning, but after 20 years at the lab, there was limited progress (Willman 2011). Perhaps the 2001 anthrax attacks would garner more funding for his labs once the country needed his vaccine, the FBI theory goes. Dr. Ivins is regrettably not here to say if that is true, having killed himself with a Tylenol overdose on July 29, 2008 (Willman 2011). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, however, disputed the FBI's claim: "the Bureau overstated the strength of genetic analysis linking the mailed anthrax to a supply kept by Bruce E. Ivins ... It is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion about the origins of the B. Anthracis based on the available scientific evidence alone" (Staff 2011). Despite committing the occasional battery as his crime record shows, Dr. Ivins also fancied himself an entertainer: he was a frequent juggler (a whiff of the Joker from Nolan's 2008 film is there) and played keyboards for Irish folk bands. This borderland between the polished and the diabolical, between wanting recognition and being bitter for not accomplishing the highest goals, is the anxious zone where Dr. Crane also moves.

Dr. Crane/The Scarecrow developed and administered toxins that can kill people as well, as the FBI supposed Dr. Ivins did. First the Crane toxin would make people either hallucinate whatever they most feared (for Batman, it is often the fear of losing the people he loves most) or to have no fear at all. If given a toxin to fear everyone around you, you may attack them. What would happen to Gotham if such a toxin were aerated throughout the city (with the prisoners already broken out from The Narrows District). The whole city would claw itself apart, and this was the design of Ra's al Ghul as facilitated by the academic Scarecrow, who has blasted both Batman and his love Rachel Dawes with the poison compound.

The other problem Bruce Wayne faces beyond toxin sprays to his eyes, nose, and mouth is his painful past. He must also be wary of therapists and psychologists and wizard-like manipulators like Ra's al Ghul who have always been able to see into his mind, heart, motivation, and spirit. Dr. Crane is the epitome of the dangerous or even Gothically psychopathic psychiatrist who loves to wear the ratty, tattered mask of a scarecrow, the kind of covering that psychologists report increases de-individuation and prompts people more easily to crime because they feel anonymous. Though his clients at Arkham Asylum have the most serious hallucinations and self-destructive violence, he seems most of all the one beyond any

healing. All of this is leading to the question of how much PTSD does Bruce Wayne have? As an adult, does he have some or most of the symptoms of this disorder? Is he dysfunctional because of it?

We can say for certain that Bruce Wayne, like America itself, was signaling his post-terror trauma from the first moments of *The Batman Begins*. The first scene from the first second through the second minute of the film is of a dream flashback where Wayne is in an Asiatic prison but dreams of home as a child, of running with young friend Rachael Dawes (daughter of the Wayne Family maid), seeing the arrowhead she has found, and then falling down a well. As he awakens, he is depressingly back in some dark and dank Chinese-like dungeon where inmates dress in Mao jackets. This vision or dream, which teams with other anxiety sensations of falling—as in falling like outcast into mob of more unified prisoners—is simply shrugged off by him as a nightmare. Before a vile breakfast gruel that morning, he hears—“You are in Hell, Little Man. And I’m the Devil” (Nolan 2005). Attacked after the blurt by a fellow inmate for no reason besides the obvious fact that his Western features are different, more blows pummel him from a band of convicts, until Bruce finally beats the pack off of him, and finally this pre-Batman himself is dragged off by guards seeking to protect the rest of the prison population from his fists and agile reflexes. By minute ten of *Batman Begins*, Wayne is asked in a tender whisper by a well-dressed visitor Henri Ducard, who then proceeds to beat him: “What do you fear?” (2005). Now Wayne has a flashback of being in the well, the bats rushing over him, and a dark figure rappelling down the well, his tender father, saying “It’s okay” and later, “Why do we fall, Bruce? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up” (Nolan 2005). Distressingly and unnervingly, the sadistic and charismatic Ducard can mimic some of Bruce’s father’s gestures as well as voice: he is a figure like a master interrogator we see in some of the GWOT novels: at times offering comfort almost as a father or mentor, and then at other times smashing heads and insisting on information and muttering about the necessity of cleansing the world by burning cities grown too arrogant. Critics like Joshua C. Feblowitz have addressed Ra’s al Ghul’s extremist and allegorical nature well, connecting it to our post-9/11 anxieties: “He’s the head of a shadowy international organization hidden in the mountains of central Asia who, at the climax of the film, seeks to overthrow the established social order by driving a multi-passenger transportation device into a skyscraper in the heart of a major American city. Sound familiar?” (2009). If Feblowitz’s question is not giving an assured answer of “Osama Bin

Laden,” Christopher Nolan helps settle it by himself likening Ducard to Osama Bin Laden in interviews. But what is much more intriguing is how Batman himself has allegorical connections to terrorists. Indeed, Chuck Tate makes the dark case that “Batman is not focused on helping people at all; instead, helping is simply a consequence of his self-indulgently aggressive behavior” (2008), and Feblowitz would carry it further: “the fact that Batman’s quest for personal vengeance benefits Gotham is incidental” (2009). As Kristine Kathryn Rusch explains, “Superman might stand for truth, justice and the American Way, but he’s an alien. ... Superman works hard at maintaining all the best traits of Americans. ... But he’s not us and he never has been ... Batman *is*” (2008). Possibly the best understanding of Batman’s dualistic nature comes from the filmmaker Christopher Nolan himself and the actor who brought him to dark life, Christian Bale. As Nolan highlights it,

Starting on *Batman Begins*, it was always about what we were afraid of, and obviously what we were afraid of post-9/11 was terrorism. We [my brother Jonah and I] talked ... about ‘the American Taliban,’ John Walker Lindh. Bruce goes to a mysterious foreign country and gets radicalized. ... There’s no way not to have that be a huge part of things. The whole discussion of ‘the hero becomes the villain,’ at the end of *The Dark Knight*, and ‘we get the hero we need, not the hero we deserve’—all this came about because the concept of heroism became very devalued post-9/11. ... [But] true heroism is invisible” (quoted in Shone 2020, 199)

The sense of the villain being inside Batman coincides with Derrida’s understanding of how the fighter of terrorism has internalized terroristic strategies, brutality, and coldness, sometimes inflicting death disproportionate to the initial violence.

The only flashback Bruce has while his parents are still alive, at approximately minute 13 in *Batman Begins*, is one where they are seated at *Mefistofele*, and the opera performers playing bat devils swirl about overhead. Eight-year-old Bruce flashes back to being trapped in the well of screeching bats with no way up and out. He asks his gentle doctor-father if they can leave the opera. The father obliges, seeming to understand his son’s distress, and moments later, the family is attacked in the alleyway as they exit by a criminal named Joe Chill, all to get the money they have and the necklace Martha Wayne wears. From a trauma-gothic standpoint overshadowing all of Nolan’s *Dark Knight* trilogy, some of the most haunting

words come from this conflict. The last words of Bruce's father are not "We loved you" or "You'll always be safe even if we are gone." The final words are the ones that Bruce will contend with all his life, and when he forgets them, he will be reminded that having them makes him a hero: "Don't be afraid" (Nolan 2005). Feblowitz characterizes the spreading socio-politico-cultural lengthening of the shadows of fear well: "The thematic obsession with fear that pervades these films echoes the terrorist's primary apparatus of control and emphasizes the importance of conquering fear... . Villains such as Ra's al Ghul utilize fear as a means of control; no large-scale destruction is required to achieve his ends. Indeed, his ultimate goal is to spread a weaponized, fear-inducing chemical throughout the city" (Feblowitz 2009). However, a few years later, we will see in *The Dark Knight* that Batman has conquered his fear too much—he no longer fears death. But without mortal dread, there is no way he can escape the prison pit of Ra's al Ghul that Bane has dropped him into. Fear of death makes one leap higher, according to what a sympathetic inmate confesses to Bruce. In a trilogy of constant ironies, viewers may discover that recovering traumatic fear is also recovering life and escape.

It is poignant that Bruce Wayne, who seems to have little inclination to take and live with a long-term partner and raise children, still thinks constantly of his own family nest from before the murders of his parents. When we look at this movie through the lens of PTSD, it is shocking how many times, and sometimes seemingly at random, the billionaire playboy sheds his pacific image and looks lost, as if seeing ghosts. That is because he *is* seeing ghosts in his flashbacks. His injured parents in the hallucinations or visions or dreams appear still alive but wounded; they look slightly different from when they were first shot in the alley; the Uncanny is steadily and shockingly operating on Bruce Wayne. It is revealingly consistent that in all the works we survey, it is often the image of another's last living moments that forms the ghost in the flashback for the living. As he looks into Ra's al Ghul's eyes, who is about to fall from the monorail to death far below near the final frames of *Batman Begins*, is he seeing some flashback to his own parents' eyes flickering out? And if so, how is Bruce Wayne able to say, "I won't kill you... . But I won't have to save you" (Nolan 2005)? It at first suggests on the conscious level that Wayne is moving beyond the guilt that has plagued him since his parents' loss or the sense that he is to blame for their death.

We are interested in why people see ghosts and monsters in the varied Global War on Terror media, and one reason is people's guilt compels

them to desire punishment by an otherworldly or after-worldly sensed presence. Early in *Batman Begins*, small Bruce Wayne himself had a paralyzing guilt of the bat-like acrobatic demons in *Mefistofele*, pushed his parents to leave the opera house, and they entered an alley and were shot to death in a holdup. If little Bruce had not shown fear, his parents could still be alive and his fate would be altogether different. It is curious that when fear toxins are dispersed from the broken water mains into the air late in *Batman Begins*, that people tend to see vengeful figures. Gotham's citizens could see anything that they are afraid of, but they dread most an avenging face. Perhaps many of them do so because they feel complicit in Gotham's corruption and rottenness. Indeed, the issue of the one percent having so much wealth and ruling power is a stressed point in the film, and Christopher Nolan admits to filming near Wall Street as the Occupy Wall Street movement commenced in Zuccotti Park (Shone 2020). Ra's al Ghul talks himself as an avenger, someone to give the retribution, and complains that Gotham's decadence—like that corrupting Constantinople, Rome, Paris, and London, which all suffered his flames as well—must damn the city. Gotham shall be burned, Ra's al Ghul insists, and will begin again without the diseased social structure. Ra's al Ghul connects well to the creatures we fear and misunderstand, including ghosts, which “have long been thought of as vehicles for justice,” whether we look at earlier examples of the ghost of Hamlet's father or the phantom of the murdered Banquo “pointing an accusing finger at the man responsible for his death” in *Macbeth* (Stone 2020). Another reason fictional characters and real individuals see ghosts include a lack of sleep or being in an ambiguous or frightful location or extreme stress (McAndrew 2015). If you are alone in unnatural nature or a weird place, peak levels of stress are triggered along with changes in brain chemistry (2015). An impossible being, “a seemingly flesh-and-blood entity such as Clooney's character in [the Oscar winning 2013 film] *Gravity*,” may be perceived. “This entity,” psychologist Frank T. McAndrew reports, “might be a god, a spirit, an ancestor, or someone personally known to the observer” (2015). All of the environments in the Global War on Terror storytelling have to be considered intensely stressful, sometimes shame-producing, uncanny, full of awe and heightened danger, all provoking a sense of imminent threat which increases the chance of a perceived paranormal encounter.

A fourth flashback troubles Bruce around the 21-minute mark in *Batman Begins* where Ducard seeing into the fight in Bruce's soul between rage and grief asks him why he did not avenge his parents. Vengeance is

the only thing that has helped Ducard, he claims, after his wife was killed. For traumatized victims, Ducard indicates, if they pursue revenge, then they will no longer obsess over and resent the people who have died and made them so miserable. This leads to the flashback where Bruce had the pistol and prepared to slay Joe Chill as he came out of a sentencing hearing but was beat to the fatal shot by Falcone's hit-woman. Chill became a doomed informant on his former cellmate, the mob boss Falcone. A vein bulges on Bruce's forehead as this primal trauma is remembered in front of Ducard (secretly Ra's al Ghul), and his face is downcast. The future Batman is having an escalation of post-traumatic stresses. The memory brings no healing, only more of a sense that he needs to continue his seven years of wandering (Fig. 9.2).

A fifth flashback in this series of visions disturbs Bruce at the 29-minute mark. He sees Joe Chill shoot his parents once again, and he throws the gun into the river with which he planned to kill Chill. At that point, he goes to meet the man ordering the hit on Chill, and the goons of Falcone beat Bruce and throw him into the gutter of a rain-slicked Gotham street. This is one of the key moments of realization for Bruce, and moment he determines to go on his Asian sojourn. All these traumatic sensations our hero endured left him confused about what action to take as an orphan



Fig. 9.2 A traumatized Bruce Wayne having left Gotham to wander Asia, years before he becomes Batman. (Screenshot: *Batman Begins* Blu-ray)

with massive survivor guilt and no chance to avenge his parents since the killer has bled to death. In many Batman accounts, Bruce at this point tries out for law enforcement, and then leaves it; he enters the best universities, including Princeton in *Batman Begins*, and leaves them. Now in Nolan's version, he takes to his time in the wilderness. Wandering Asia and the Middle East, becoming imprisoned and located by Henri Ducard, Bruce seems to have found his path, through martial arts training, to a vow to fight criminals, but trauma will not leave him alone. A figure, who says he is Ra's al Ghul ("Head of the Demon/Ghoul" in Arabic, so the comic book says), with Ducard's urging, asks him to behead a criminal ISIS style in front of all with a long blade. This moment is telling: it is a chance, for the unwary, to hope to lose some of their trauma, by becoming the victimizer instead of the victim. Bruce shows wisdom beyond his years by refusing to humiliate and kill the criminal this way and attacks Ra's al Ghul's compound instead. As he makes his getaway, Bruce saves a falling Ducard who seems unconscious and is slipping down the mountain side (Fig. 9.3).

Giving audiences a glimpse of his storytelling power with flashback storytelling in *Memento* and affirming it with *Batman Begins*, this director (noted for always reading both magazines and menus from their last page and then flipping to their first as Tom Shone mentions in *The Nolan Variations*) finds the way to show Bruce Wayne's agony and mental repetition of the murder of his parents in a more unexpected and more piercing way. And Bruce, though we see him showing signs of distress during the



Fig. 9.3 Bruce Wayne falling with and soon saving the life of Ra's al Ghul in a remote Asian training center for the League of Shadows. (Screenshot: *Batman Begins* Blu-ray)

flashbacks, shows resolution and clear mindedness now. He is anticipating another identity with no swords, no guns, and no intentional killing. After the murder of his parents, there was no psychological counseling or therapy for Batman in his youth. Children who suffer trauma often help work out some feelings through making short stories, drawing figures, inventing games as Ann Goldman illustrates (1998). However, after his foiled plan to kill Mr. Chill in the corridor of Gotham City Hall, after abandonment of college, after imprisonment and seven years of wandering in Asia, he returns to Gotham—much to Alfred's worry—and develops a fascination with the accoutrement in becoming a superhero. Bruce Wayne makes the discovery of posttraumatic growth himself, creatively losing himself in becoming another, a fusion of man and bat to instill fear. The striking bachelor billionaire is often seen by us and Alfred at his family mansion over a grinder, working long into the night, perfecting protection and weapons that will disable but not kill criminals he meets on the streets of Gotham. All the hours he pours over making the costume and gadgets to inspire dread in Gotham's underbelly may in a way be healing. He is finally investing himself into something worthy to devote a life.

Some prelude to his Bat identity, then, is here as a protector of Gotham. He has seen through Ducard, who later we find is the actual Ra's al Ghul who has been alive for centuries by visiting a place when illness strikes called "the pit of Lazarus." The flashbacks cause intense physical and emotional pain for their victims, including Bruce, but in this more hopeful film, they also raise the question of what to do with our past and what our past chooses to do with us: a sense of posttraumatic growth is germinating. A filmmaker finally found the way to make Batman relate to and explore the profoundest sides of traumatized lives, to our own unhealing wounds. Nolan has said that Batman is a story in darkness, and this is a dark mirroring of Bruce's father's life, who was more of an economic and medical rescuer in Gotham bringing in some light (with hospitals and markets and even spearheading the drive for cheap monorail transport to bring the people to the city to work who cannot afford to live in Gotham) and even of his great grandfather who Alfred claims helped runaway slaves using subterranean parts of his land as a station in the Underground Railroad. That generosity noted, dystopian fantasist China Miéville has made the arresting argument, though perhaps it is a polemic forced or incompletely evidenced, that the film is criticizing such solidarity: Miéville finds the trilogy's "final way of *solving* social catastrophe is ... by the demolition of the mass transit system that ruined everything by literally

raising the poor and put them among the rich: travelling together, social-democratic welfarism as opposed to trickle-downism is a nice dream but leads to social collapse” (quoted in Fisher 2006). Miéville, who had been trying to be part of the talent directory at Batman’s DC Comics for years and finally did with *Dial H* in 2012, senses that the film suggests that if such benevolence is “left unchecked [it ushers] terrorism that sends transit systems careering through the sky into tall buildings in the middle of New York-style cities—9/11 as caused by the crisis of *excessive social solidarity*, the arrogance of masses *not being sufficiently terrified of their shepherds*” (quoted in Fisher 2006). If this is one of the truths of *The Dark Knight* trilogy, there is not much point in philanthropy or new urbanism planning. But there may not be solid enough evidence to suggest this bleakness Miéville’s sees actually inhabits our pointy-eared protagonist, that one who prefers to move in the shadows and live in a cave and groans at attending soirees with rich donors. Even Batman, however jaundiced he can be and despite his desire to paint it all black, still does not fully believe life in Gotham is hopeless nor that any attempt at city progress is bound to fail. And even if evil operatives can take control of devices meant for benevolent ends (like Wayne Enterprises Inc.’s energy dynamo in *The Dark Knight Rises*) that does not mean all acts of benevolence should be denied (Nolan 2012). Though 2022’s *The Batman* may challenge any prospect of goodwill in Gotham via its early voiceover from the caped hero, by the end even of that dismal film, there is some evidence of hope, and Batman himself is leading it.

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Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008): Interrogations, Lies, & Anarchic Jokers

One of the most obvious truths about trauma and terrorism is shared by *The Dark Knight* trilogy continuously. The lesson is that if people are neglected, unloved, or embittered by taking their caregivers or love away, they can become angry, vindictive, or sadistic in time, having had their attachment patterns severely and permanently damaged. When one looks at a prison population, studies steadily find that the convicts of the most unthinkable murders are predictably victims of abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) by caregivers (Marono et al. 2020). Similarly, one of the harshest truths of American films from 2002 to 2022 is that the same film can be seen from Western eyes as War *against* Terror, but in the eyes of the Other, a War *of* Terror. It seems again obvious to say that if innocent families are murdered by drone attacks when attending weddings or funerals, or simply getting into or out of their car, then the entire extended family has a vendetta. Likewise, torturing innocent suspects, or severely mistreating those found guilty of minor infractions, again can make an army of “Jokers.” This is seldom explored in film and seems the central irony in the GWOT—and one the U.S. government never makes enough effort to stop (according to data covering 20 years of military abuses by the Research Director at the Center for Naval Analysis Larry Lewis, reported on the *PBS Newshour* in 2021 after one of the last drone attacks killed an Afghan translator for the U.S military, as well as his children while Western forces scrambled out of Kabul). As Lewis solemnly puts it, “we have seen

thousands of these strikes [on civilians by the U.S.]. ... There's no leadership on this issue" (2021). In prosecuting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the West only increased exponentially the numbers of current and future enemy combatants and terrorist attackers in foreign countries, at American bases, and upon Western soil. We go to "eradicate" terror as President George W. Bush once vowed, with the naivete that hate and political violence can ever be vanquished completely, and find ourselves irrigating forbidden gardens of terror.

Terence McSweeney captures the essence of why Batman serves us better than other superheroes in capturing the gulf between rhetoric and deed: "While Superman has historically been considered as the pre-eminent personification of American ethics and values, ... It is Batman, especially in his new millennial incarnation, who more readily encompasses the complicated and polarized post-9/11 American psyche, and this may be one of the reasons for the phenomenal success of Christopher Nolan's interpretation of the character in the decade after the attacks on 11 September 2001" (2014). Abetting McSweeney's logic is that Superman is an alien, an orphan shipped away from his home planet at birth but one who never was able to shed tears for his parents as he has no memories of them, a creature with no bitter memories of life on his home planet as a child, one overendowed with powers save for the rarely encountered batch of Kryptonite, a being not doomed to age or become frail like the rest of us. Superman can seem as remote as a beautiful AI creation: impervious, unstoppable, but somehow lacking tragic intuition or a traumatized soul. But Batman is one of us, never alien, definitely having suffered profound trauma and loss, and one who will bleed if you cut him, and who has spent some days in hospital before. There is a power and a fragility all in one. He is a scion, but not an unwaveringly decadent or spoiled one. He was a symbol of success and aspiration coming out of the hopelessness of the year of his publication (1939), as the depression was still upon America. He was an unabashed capitalist (one of the Nolan films goes as far as to use Trump Tower as the Wayne Enterprises Building, with the former President Trump thumping "I'll tell you, it was really terrific" [Shone 2020, 251]), but at least he and family were investing his money in projects to serve the greater good (including a boy's home and a monorail into the city). And even if one of the attendees of the Wayne Ball in *The Dark Knight Rises* will take aim and accuse Bruce Wayne of being that infamous germophobic rich guy (who also flew) and had the long fingernails and jars of urine stacked in his shuttered penthouse suite, it is not true that

Wayne holds up and hoards like a hypochondriac Howard Hughes, who did little benevolence when he was the richest man in the world in the mid twentieth century. I believe Terence McSweeney peels back the curtain when he notes that “while America may wish to see itself as the principled and noble Superman, in reality it resembles more closely the conflicted and much more morally ambiguous Batman” (2014). Michael Caine himself, playing Alfred marvelously throughout the Nolan trilogy, is said to concede that “Superman is the way America sees itself, but Batman is the way the world sees America” (quoted in Henriksen 2008).

TORTURE AND THE FORCE DRIFT

A relentless, hard-driving, closed-in gangster movie is *The Dark Night*—which eschews much of the classicism and exotic locales that the beautiful if more traditional cinema of *Batman Begins* demonstrated (with its nods to the hero’s journey within David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* and John Huston’s *The Man Who Would Be King*). In his unrelenting *The Dark Knight*, which Christopher Nolan calls “frightening,” a “cruel, cold film,” a violent “machine,” and a “white-knuckle ride” (Shone 2020, 192–194), one long-embedded reality it shares with Gothic fiction is torture. A key arena for torture’s rampant use in Gothic novels is with the Catholic Church’s institution of the Inquisition. We see torture relied on to get testimony, descriptions of Black Sabbaths, confessions of Satanic pledging, and the naming of other doomed suspects in such Gothic novel standouts as Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, in William Godwin’s *St. Leon*, Baculard d’Arnaud’s *Coligny*, and Boutet de Monvel’s *Les Victimes de Clôîtrées*. We see torture used to put enemies in agony in the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and even later works by writers more interested in the “Gothic of the soul” as Poe described it, rather than its outer trappings of castles, graveyards, and dungeons. Then there are Gothic masterpieces that combine torture to inflict pain on enemies and use it for theological reasons (first against lies and ultimately to punish hypocrisy, as a devil does to Ambrosio in fall after mountain fall and the ripping apart of monkflesh by eagles at the end of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*). Torture, in the Inquisition’s view, affirms the powers of God’s agents and the sovereigns (on earth and in the invisible realms) who say they rule under the order of God.

In the GWOT transmedia, torture is recontextualized, employed now as both vengeance and an often misguided attempt to extract information

to “save American lives” (see its use in cinema of terrorism from *Zero Dark Thirty* to *The Forever Prisoner* to *The Card Counter*). It is often remarked by perceptive critics that American films from the GWOT period portray torture in the most one-sided way downplaying its indecency and echoing remarks made by both President George W. Bush’s Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice President Dick Cheney in the first years after 9/11. The impulse in films is for the CIA and its Office of Medical Services (OMS) to be “frequently present during enhanced interrogation sessions [to measure detainees’] ... vital signs in order to advise on whether the prisoners were well enough for the interrogations to continue... [OMS also] offered counsel as to the capabilities of the human body to resist extreme pressure” (McSweeney 2014). To barely keep the torture covered-up, an exasperated CIA chief George Tenet issued huffy denials, sweating and protesting too much in a bizarre CBS News interview that resembled a *Saturday Night Live* skit on truth avoidance. Tenet bellowed, “We DON’T TORTURE PEOPLE. Let me say that again. [Finger points] *We don’t torture people. Okay?! Listen to me!* Nope, I want YOU to LISTEN to ME. We don’t torture people, and I don’t talk about techniques. [Pauses, gives annoyed look]. But ... We. Don’t. Torture. People” (2007).

A career U.S. Military Intelligence informant who served ten classified missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and assorted African countries between 2001 and 2019, speaking to me on condition of anonymity, disagreed with the CIA Director. (My source’s specific expertise was on “Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)”: his goal was to find patterns of behavior used by malicious actors in the countries we had invaded, as well as meeting and dissuading Iraqis and Afghans from broadcasting messages that harmed the American counter-insurgency effort.) This Military Intelligence source said of his meetings with the CIA operatives in Afghanistan around 2007, that they surprised him in all the wrong ways. The oblivious CIA was “showing up in late model, black BMWs in Kabul, obvious for spotting by their adversaries.” They had, my source notes, spent “too much time sitting in rooms at Langley [CIA Headquarters in Washington, D.C.] when ISIS was taking off.” My source’s memory was that the CIA agents “would ask the most ridiculous questions once in-country, stuck in an Academe world. They needed to get their asses outta classes and figure how things really worked. The CIA never impressed. But the FBI always impressed: sharp guys; some badass boys; they had leeway; they can knock on anybody’s door ...” (U.S. Military Intelligence

Officer 2022). The most revealing takeaway is what younger CIA agents confessed and requested my source in 2007: “Our tools are *old shit*, but we need to do *High Level Shit*,” despite having an annual budget mushrooming by billions of dollars post-9/11 (Brown 2000; Staff 2022) to handle “data collection; data analysis; management, facilities and support; and data processing and exploitation” (Gellman and Miller 2013). My informant offered newer techniques to several junior CIA agents to replace the “severely outdated ones” and to pressure and persuade persons of interest in Afghanistan and Iraq. The “art,” in my informant’s words, was to “figure out motivation” in the more malleable enemies—that might mean “more money for him to buy another fourteen year old wife,” then “manipulating that man to do what we want him to do ... in communications, in hanging out with some lowlife insurgent guys and keeping an eye out on ‘A, B, & C.’”) Unfortunately, later commanding officers at Langley would order the unseasoned in-country CIA agents “to stop taking TTPS from the U.S. fuckin’ army!” (U.S. Military Intelligence Officer 2022). Arrogance, rivalry, and territoriality at CIA headquarters would trump effective counter-terrorism and updated techniques on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Beyond refusing to update itself, massive amounts of photographic and videographic evidence surfaced to demolish CIA chief Tenet’s declared faith in and appraisal of what the CIA was doing in another country, Iraq. Thousands of images of horrendous abuse that led to mental and permanent physical injury and even death of detainees under American control, of which the public saw hundreds, led to upper White House and Pentagon sources to offer a classic “a few bad apples” defense, rather than admitting the United States had “bad barrels” of soldiers working at its in-country prisons. This torture was committed, so the argument went from the CIA and military chiefs, by a few twisted men and women in uniform (at the bottom of command), but was never sought or condoned by military generals, FBI heads, or the CIA chief, nor the President of the United States. In the end, it was NCOs, privates and sergeants, often shown in the photographs, who would take the fall for the violations. One of the most revealing documentaries capturing the late U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld shifting reasons for allowing abuse is Errol Morris’s *The Unknown Known* (2013) where the gleaming-eyed and Cheshire-cat smiling Donald Rumsfeld dodges to evade questioning. Likewise, one of the richest documentaries about abuse at military detention sites, albeit filled with his trademark and controversial and contested dramatic recreations,

is Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008). Critics slammed both documentaries (Milliken and Anderson 2021) for letting the subjects off the hook by letting them tell their stories without enough challenges by the interviewer. On the other side, I perceive these documentaries as Morris wisely letting the subjects go deeper into what happened before interrupting the confessional flow and moving on. A bit of rambling now by the interviewee can lead to devastating admissions later (which was proven in one of his early documentaries, *The Thin Blue Line* from 1988, with David Harris admitting to the killing of a Dallas police officer for which another man had been convicted, Randal Dale Adams. Like David Harris, perhaps unconsciously Donald Rumsfeld did not want to keep the secrets anymore, perhaps he did, but the secrets are out now.

Twenty years after his acts planning the Afghanistan invasion in 2001 as the architect of the Iraq War in 2003 who developed the “Rumsfeld Doctrine” in the American military (to fly in as tiny a force as possible to emerging conflicts), it is easy to forget the widespread support there was in American for Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld’s “Man of Action” pursuit against terrorism and his embrace of enhanced interrogation. Even political scientists at my college embraced his gusto style, one remarking that this is how people like Rumsfeld born in the City of Big Shoulders—Chicago—get things done: they plow through the snow and the wind, pay no attention to the risks, and made their city as the New York of the Midwest. What is forgotten is that Rumsfeld’s city also is about blood: it made much of its money initially as the home of filthy slaughtering yards and unsafe meat-packing industries where “everything but the squeal” and the moo were sent off to be eaten, along with some fingers of the underage and exhausted workers (as Upton Sinclair’s 1906 exposé novel, *The Jungle*, testifies in unsparing grisly detail). Rumsfeld was a political science major at Princeton, served as a Congressperson during the Vietnam War, and was eventually selected as both the oldest Secretary of Defense (under President George W. Bush) and the youngest (under President Ford). As the highest overseer of the military and its sites, Rumsfeld would be questioned about leaks about torture before Abu Ghraib. One memo he read about torture executed at Guantanamo Bay he hand-signed off on and inscribed at its bottom edge, “I stand for 8–10 hours a day. Why is standing [up these suspects] limited for 4 hours?” (*The Unknown Known* 2013). That sardonic defense wilted, however, after eight retired American generals and an assortment of retired NATO generals insisted Rumsfeld resign. Following the shock waves caused by the Abu Ghraib photographs,

Rumsfeld would offer his “deepest apology” on May 7, 2004, admitted he “was accountable for them,” and eventually tendered his resignation. President George W. Bush refused to accept the resignation. Under a second wave of more abuses and documented torture by official American hands, Rumsfeld would again offer his resignation on November 6, 2006, and President Bush finally accepted it one day after mid-term elections, which were disastrous for Republicans, on November 8, 2006. Experts on law (including Alette Smeulers and Sander van Niekerk 2009) have found that Rumsfeld stood a chance at being tried for war crimes (allowing “torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment”) by the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the German prosecutor Wolfgang Kaleck made a filing of criminal charges for Rumsfeld to be tried for ordering prisoners’ torture. “Freedom’s untidy,” Rumsfeld only quipped in response (*The Unknown Known* 2013). There was no allowance for Rumsfeld to be extradited by the United States, however, because Rumsfeld’s supervisor had made certain that the United States, which usually touted itself as the protector of human rights abroad, withdrew its signature to the Rome Statute for the founding of the ICC. President Bush’s hostility to the court charter that 123 other nations signed was revealing of uncertainty over the morality and ethics of America’s war acts. There was White House unease over not controlling investigations and legal outcomes to such hearings on American violations and atrocities and accompanying U.S. threats to thwart efforts of countries that did sign the Rome Statute. Rather than seeing an international court as dispassionate and unbiased, President George W. Bush saw it the other way: “I wouldn’t join the International Criminal Court. This is a body based in The Hague where unaccountable judges, prosecutors, could pull our troops, our diplomats up for trial. And I wouldn’t join. And I understand that in certain capitals of, around the world that that wasn’t a popular move. But it’s the right move not to join a foreign court that could, where our people could be prosecuted” (Bush 2007). When it was in the U.S. interest to see some leaders and their lieutenants prosecuted by this court, however, as with President Bush’s second term and the court’s international investigations of massacres in Sudan, then the United States praised the ICC, and eventually warmed to the point of calling itself an “official observer” of its proceedings. This double standard would be reshowed inside the United States as well by its own military investigators, underscoring the need for an international tribunal to investigate violations. The hypocritical outcome was that the lowest-rank troops in the Abu Ghraib would pay the

costliest price for the scandalous abuse of detainees, be put under a trial, and sentenced to prison. Rumsfeld, though, for permitting such abuses to occur would walk away a free man. The repeated story is that the powerful will be protected, just as they are in the shadowy cinematic world of official secrets and governmental lies within *The Dark Knight*. The District Attorney's crimes in this film, including abduction of a child and murder and collusion with the Joker will go unpunished (understandably at first because he, Harvey Dent, falls off a tower with Batman) and will remain unmentioned to the public until the next film *The Dark Knight Rises* forces the truth out through the mouth of Bane. A lie is born and fed, only to metastasize and cause distress later. Justine Toh makes an intriguing case that "freedom fighter" Batman's vigilantism and "best tools and toys of war" (that the Joker himself fancies) rely "on force as the impetus of social change," but that such "vigilantism does not ultimately work and cannot produce real safety or freedom. Instead, Batman's preference for force destines him to become what he most despises: a villain" (Toh 2010, 135–136). I would agree but add that when Batman colludes with liars for expediency's sake, he erodes his standing and public trust as much as the collateral damage he does to property and life. For a voiced deceit is always with thought and on purpose, but death delivered by the Dark Knight may still be unintended. Batman will excuse and help execute the big lie in the closing moments of *The Dark Knight*, sounding more eloquent but still as disreputable as the still lying CIA Chief George Tenet, and Bruce Wayne will live to regret these words, "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough, sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded" (Nolan 2008). Wayne's sophistry may have seemed acceptable to some viewers at the end of the intense, rattling *The Dark Knight* where any peace would be welcomed, but it plants another seed for Gotham's destruction at the hands of someone even madder than Ra's al Ghul.

For the Defense Secretary's part, Rumsfeld's defense was that the people of Iraq had been liberated, and that press domestic and foreign were mistakenly concentrating on "smaller flaws" (including indefinite detention and distress of prisoners) of the Iraqi occupation, and that these scandals would only benefit our enemies in the area of what I term their Jihadist R&R (Recruitment and Revenge). Rumsfeld finishes the interview with Errol Morris with haunting words of the invasions and tortures to come, as if what we have gone through is preparation for more, as if confirming Derrida's concept that the worst of terrorism is not the attack

but the debilitating apprehension about the future attack to come: “We’re a fortunate country. And if the Good Lord wills, we won’t have to engage in wars. But I’m afraid that human nature being what it is, we’ll have to continue to ask young men and women to serve our country, and their lives will be at risk” (*The Unknown Known* 2013). This seems yet again to be a more than willing acceptance of the GWOT going on forever and ever.

A much analyzed film linked to Donald Rumsfeld—who ironically said in a Pentagon news conference, “I don’t do quagmires”—in how it accepts torture is *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which McSweeney reasonably calls “perhaps the defining American film of the post-9/11 era” (2014). About the film, Director Kathryn Bigelow insisted that she was simply representing the abuses at Black Sites, but not defending them. Scholars (as well as my students who viewed the movie in my film classes) often see it differently. *Zero Dark Thirty*, flying against all evidence gathered by most interrogation experts next (Tayler and Epstein 2022), shows brutal torture getting some actionable intelligence on terror agents’ funding, movements, bases, when and where an attack next comes, and the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden develops in the film mostly in the shadows, himself a kind of taunting Joker against the powers he finds to be liars and hypocrites. Bin Laden is depicted as the Joker who values ideology over a mountain of money, those very funds that the Joker was happy to burn in *The Dark Knight* or that Saudi inheritance Bin Laden was satisfied to use funding Jihad. A continued criticism of the Oscar winning *Zero Dark Thirty* is that Director Bigelow and Writer Mark Boal, who received cooperation from the CIA to help make the film, crafted a beautiful and powerful movie (where Jessica Chastain’s one minute of weeping on a giant transport plane after Bin Laden has finally been found and killed left audiences stunned). But *Zero Dark Thirty*’s one-sided nature left a deep flaw in its making and telling, and it seems in hindsight to excuse and even validate beating suspects and making them believe their impending death from drowning. In 2013, Naomi Wolf went as far as to call Bigelow America’s Leni Riefenstahl, making a U.S. propaganda film as astonishingly creepy as Leni Riefenstahl did with her 1935 *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) for Adolf Hitler, the Nazi party, his adoring storm-troopers, and their sympathizers worldwide. A similar complaint could be of the fascist overtones in *The Dark Knight*, especially as Batman spies on the phone calls of millions to find that one call which will tell the Joker’s movements, protested by his lead technology advisor Lucius Fox, acted by Morgan Freeman. But is it fair to make the charge against a fantasy film

whose suspects are often guilty of some heinous crime or another, if not the one they are officially charged with?

Batman has a well-earned reputation in comics, TV, and movies for being a brutal interrogator, but again, are his tactics somehow warranted? For instance, Batman frequently dangles people upside down from heights, smashes them against cinder block walls and city hall columns, and knocks their heads against two-way mirrors, as we see memorably done to the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The trauma against the Joker's head is so hard that the glass cracks, and those glass shards will permit the Joker to take a hostage in the police station later. This is a seldom mentioned detail, yet Batman's harsh and remorseless fashion of interrogation gives the equipment for abuse of fellow GWOT law enforcement, troops, or allies later. It should give us pause, and respect for the ways the Nolan brothers are creating doubt about Batman's methods, and making viewers squirm about superhero ethics. Some research shows the Nolans pulled their punches back, possibly to make our decision making over the torture used even more uncertain. The original screenplay had Batman kick in the head of a prostrate Joker as the Caped Crusader heads out of the interrogation chamber, which clearly should have been beyond the beyonds for a superhero's audience, one hopes. One could argue, of course, that the Joker's attacks on those unlucky souls that Batman admires and loves is far more cruel and lethal. Brutality harvests greater brutality. Indeed, even the Joker's beatings of Batman are not restrained things: the Joker hits Batman with an iron bar, kicks him in the ribs, runs at him with a boot switchblade, and hurls him against walls—and for dessert, the Joker tortures to death some recreational Batman impersonators during their amateurish spells mimicking vigilantism.

As *The Last Days of New Paris* (2016) novelist China Miéville intuits clearly, “Monsters demand decoding, but to be worthy of their own monstrosity, they avoid final capitulation to that demand” (2012). Let us try to decode the Joker to a degree, even if the essence of his nihilistic nature forbids it. When he constantly asks—but, oddly, is never actually prompted by another's concerned questioning—“Yah wanna know how I got these scars?” (Nolan 2005), the Joker is mocking a trauma victim's suffering and the brave decision to tell someone of his or her fraught suffering. The Joker changes his story every time with a nonchalance: it is as if the story is a ruse to measure the listener's reaction, to sport with terror, to buy this villain time, to darkly entertain, and to think of new crime. It is one more flourish of a magician's act—some hand motion or unfurling of the cape

to distract—and the Joker is up to his usual misdirection and criminal magic. This renders the Joker into an even more heartless character because he is a liar too, just like the rest of Gotham he skewers for falsehood, showing an unacknowledged brotherhood to them that would make him lose his smile, sitting silently for a change. Some ironic liberation is in that: the villain, despite his preaching that he sees what everyone else pretends not to, deceives himself as well, just as the rest of this gloomy city may be blind.

Not in all Batman comics, series, and films, but at least in *The Dark Knight*, I would argue, the Joker aligns most closely to figures from demonology. In some ways, the Joker evokes The Accuser in *The Book of Job* who makes a deal with God to see how long Job will worship God if plagued by a series of misfortunes. At other moments, he acts like Pazuzu from *The Exorcist* (novel from 1972 and film from 1973), in that his other goal beyond unleashing chaos is to make us despair and despise ourselves, to give up, to lose our ability to feel admired, loved, or able to give love to anyone. As Batman dangles the Joker from Trump Tower leaving him momentarily hanging like the Falling Man in a Tarot deck, he conducts another torturous interrogation, while causing us a flashback to one of the most painful intrusive and grotesque memories of the Twin Towers for viewers. That iconic image is of people falling or jumping (sometimes hand in hand with one who may have been a stranger, but who became known closely in their last collective seconds) from the World Trade Center, all to an undignified splat and thunk below on its plaza as the world watched live.

To find what drives the Joker, watch for where the manic grin finally fades. When Gotham's Gothic clocktower strikes midnight, and the sets of passengers on two ferries in *The Dark Knight* are still alive, a most depressed look sweeps across the Joker's face. Though knowing they could be destroyed at any moment by the other ferry first, these passengers avoided pressing a discharge button that could save themselves, even though the Joker pledged to blow up both ferries by midnight if neither ferry acts out of self-interest. From the full shooting script with stage directions, we read of the Joker's dismal resignation:

The smile disappears from the Joker's face.

Batman: "You're alone."

The Joker crouches down, hovering above Batman's face and arms.
Shows him the remote.

The Joker: “Can’t rely on anyone these days.”

The Joker arms the remote ...

The Joker: “Have to do everything yourself. I always have—and it’s not always easy ...” (Nolan 2008: 130)

Two characters who have chased each other for over 80 years over comics, TV, and movies do have an intimate insight for the other’s mind. Nolan’s Joker is determined to show that the world is not worth saving because its people will not bother to save each other. In this one case, he was proven wrong. Total cynicism is forever as blind as toxic optimism. Heath Ledger’s Joker (Fig. 10.1) is less a rigorous empiricist philosopher as some have called him (Walters 2009) and more a fixed ideologue. He has stopped entering in new data and concepts about his subject: there is no love for wisdom, only an impoverished view stuck in its feckless, starved state, and unwilling to reach for the nourishment of new findings. How did he get this way?

To begin to get a range of answers, consider another version of his trauma story by Director Todd Phillips, *Joker* (2019). There Arthur Fleck is a severely neglected child whose mother is committed to a psychiatric institution (Arkham), but grown Arthur has no memory of it. He



Fig. 10.1 Few have won a posthumous Oscar, and far fewer have deserved it more: the inimitable Heath Ledger as Joker. Ledger stayed alone in a hotel for weeks to perfect the strangely perfect delivery of his lines (with their oddly sympathetic yet jaded tones) and his weird, “hyenic” laughter. (Screenshot: *The Dark Knight Trilogy Special Features* Blu-ray)

excavates the awful past by stealing hospital records and is re-traumatized by the discovery of the memory-blocked abuse he has endured as a boy, which includes his mother Penny standing by as her partner chains him to an apartment radiator like a mistreated dog, and regularly abandons him without food. A missing protector is echoed in how his mother, as a domestic servant, believed and wrote a letter testifying that little Arthur's father was the billionaire she served and who was running for Mayor of Gotham—the father of Batman himself, Thomas Wayne. The supposition that Batman and his chief rival are stepbrothers became a kind of trauma bond out of Greek tragedy, and possibly helped the picture win a 2008 Academy Award for Joaquin Phoenix's performance as a murderer whose crimes were contributed to by family neglect and society's indifference. Both Arthur and Bruce rage over what happened in their youth, and they are spiritual brothers (Fig. 10.2), as well as possibly physically related. The lens through which Arthur must see the world is a dark one of constant threat, whereas adults who have not been abused as children might see the same surroundings as “part of an essentially benign universe” (van der Kolk 2014). There appear to be at least two kinds of people traumatized in the films we interrogate here. There are those like Joker who fear that “they are damaged to the core and beyond redemption, ... carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability” (van der Kolk 2014). Another survivor of trauma, like Batman, may feel surer that he can be redeemed, that his survivor guilt over impatiently pushing



Fig. 10.2 Batman and the Joker are brothers, of a dark kind. (Screenshot: *The Dark Knight* Blu-ray)

his family to leave an opera, which lead to their murders, can be overcome by fighting future criminals that threaten to destroy other families forever. He can use his hypervigilance, a “gift” from his unhealed wound of loss, to protect others. Admittedly, for this Dark Knight he is also carrying as a trauma the humiliations cast against his father. The gangster Falcone and the mentor Ra’s al Ghul both verbally attack the late Dr. Thomas Wayne, with the former saying that Bruce’s father fell on his knees and begged for his life (rather than protecting his wife) before he was shot, and the latter telling Bruce that his father was ineffective, and remembered mostly for not saving the life of his wife. Bruce was there at the traumatic episode and his memory is being tampered with by these princes of lies. It is a double trauma or re-traumatization, for they exploit Bruce’s suffering and distort how the event happened for their own manipulative ends and mastery over this man.

For his villainous part, Arthur confesses to his therapist, “I haven’t been happy one minute of *my entire fucking life*” (Phillips 2019) and promises homicide. He delivers this riddle to a talk show host and the audience during his stand-up: “What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? I’ll tell you what you get! *You get what you fucking deserve!*” (2019). Then he shoots Murray Franklin dead live on the air like a wicked drummer’s sting punctuating a punchline. To give us perspective on the abused child’s mind which could grow into an adult mind with Joker’s rage and distrust of all and sense of imminent threat, consider a photograph of a little brother and little sister watching their father repair a car that van der Kolk remembers giving to abused children early in his therapy practice. The shocked trauma therapist remembers that “One girl said that the little girl in the picture was about to smash in her father’s skull with a hammer. A nine-year-old boy who had been severely physically abused [said] ... The boy in the picture kicked away the jack, so that the car mangled his father’s body and his blood spurted all over the garage. As they told us these stories, our patients got very excited and disorganized” (van der Kolk 2014). The strengths in understanding post-traumatic stress in *The Dark Knight*, then, following the ways therapists look at children who have suffered grievously, always revolves around the awesome power in people to both explode with the past and to repress the past and those secrets kept by parents, or the ways the traumatized individual sees the same reality so differently than the non-traumatized. The Nolan films consistently deal in double traumas: the Joker was not only betrayed by his troubled mother

but by Gotham itself. Michael S. Scheeringa, specializing in child and adolescent psychiatry, blames part of Joker's misfortunes on Gotham's "government defunding the social programs he depended on for psychotherapy and psychiatric medicines" (2020). Sorchá Ni Fhlainn goes further, compellingly arguing that Joker's make-up is a canvas of social ills: "Each Joker's 'happy face' make-up registers the progression of socio-cultural malaise and its resultant madness under economic and authoritarian neoliberal practices.... Phoenix's Joker registers our social abandonment to unrealised dreams in an age of overwhelming 'legitimised' deceits routed through the presence of television ... Near-broken under the weight of our current horrors, dancing on the edge of psychosis" (2021). The unsuccessful child's birthday clown entertainer Arthur Fleck with his chilling, wailing laugh on television is one more image of human neglect in Gotham, which is echoed by the piles of abandoned garbage dumped like bodies on the sidewalks with rats running through them. Beyond forgetting and abandonment by the state, it is poverty, career rejection as a comic, enticement into crime to pay debts, and the disappearance of his lover/imaginary friend that extend the Joker's trauma past the point of any return.

One of the clearest signs (in whichever Batman film we view) that Joker is a deeply traumatized character who has been physically beaten before is his hypervigilance, a common trait amount people with PTSD. He anticipates blows and is ready to deliver them. He moves throughout *The Dark Knight* with a hyena's cunning watchfulness (and Heath Ledger studied the movements of hyenas in preparation for the part [Shone 2020]), slouched yet quick, eyes twinkling to take opportunities and to lunge and attack, or to make a feint, or to fall away. His yellowed teeth and repeated lip-licking (a brilliant if accidental tic Ledger manifested that was an attempt to keep his scar makeup and prosthetics from falling off), shrieking laughter, and mimicking of different voices' pitches again evoke a hyena prowling for game, and he does hunt with others in a pack, and in true hyena-fashion, turns on them and kills them at any chance. He is a villain without a long-serving steady partner in crime, except for his henchwoman/girlfriend Harley Quinn (who does not appear in this movie) : "Our organization is small," he growls like a barker on a YouTube ad for a new capitalist venture, "but we've got potential for *aggressive expansion* ... So which one of you fine gentlemen would like to join our team?" (Nolan 2008). He splits a pool cue and gives it to a pack of onlooking goons from the freshly murdered gangster Gambol, suggesting that the

witnesses gut each other so that the survivor may work for the Joker: “Only one slot open right now—so we’re going to have try-outs. Make it fast” (Nolan 2008).

Another organization that started small and grew to a relevant traumatic threat quickly was ISIS (ISIL). No less an adversary to ISIS than President Obama watched the Joker and calculated his comparisons. Concerned that U.S. security agencies kept underestimating the threat of ISIS to the world, in 2014 he asked security chiefs to remember that “There’s a scene in the beginning in which the gang leaders of Gotham are meeting [in *The Dark Knight*].” President Obama continued to his advisers: “These are men who had the city divided up. They were thugs, but there was a kind of order. Everyone had his turf. And then the Joker comes in and lights the whole city on fire. ISIL is the Joker. It has the capacity to set the whole region on fire. That’s why we have to fight it” (quoted in Goldberg 2016). If President Obama would turn to *The Dark Knight* for inspiration and allegorical parallels for his political parable, we will see that his successor President Trump would turn to *The Dark Knight Rises*, and ominously echo the words of Bane in President Trump’s inaugural address. After his surprise takeover, Bane on the steps of Blackgate Prison tells tense crowds in Gotham: “We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity. And we give it to you, the people” (Nolan 2012). Mustering Bane’s bluster (Fig. 10.3), Trump would tell his less than huge 2017 presidential inauguration gathering: “Today ... we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people” (qtd. in Couch 2017).

During his detention in Gotham’s police center, the Joker is questioned by Batman under Police Commissioner Gordon’s approval. The only thing that seems clear about this torture episode under Batman’s hand (just as with some of the torture of terrorist suspects in the GWOT real life) is that it is a disaster for all but the Joker. Batman is fed a lie (the abducted District Attorney and Batman’s girlfriend Rachel are actually in the opposite places that Joker directs the uncharacteristically gullible Wayne to) and Batman’s effectiveness and decency is weakened in everyone’s eyes, as well as the Commissioner losing credibility as well for permitting the torture. When other police officials see Batman crushing the Joker, they order an opening of the cell and one of the detectives moves for the door, but Commissioner Gordon insists, “He’s in control.” However, the Dark Knight is decidedly not in control. One sign of that



Fig. 10.3 An Unparalleled Threat to Democracy: Words and tones from the speech of Bane’s will be imitated by President Donald Trump in both his January 20, 2017 inaugural address and his January 6, 2021 incitement of a MAGA mob to overturn the 2020 Presidential election. (Screenshot: *The Dark Knight Rises* Blu-ray)

traumatic dysregulation is Batman placing a chair under the doorknob so the detectives cannot rush in and save the Joker from Batman’s torture (Fig. 10.4). I would argue this interrogation scene is a case of “force drift.” In a commanding performance with *The Card Counter* (2020) as a Private First Class William Tell who was found guilty of torture at Abu Ghraib (but whose instructor walked free, and now has lucrative government contracts on gathering information), this returning veteran played by Oscar Isaac explains to his protégé that force drift “happens when the interrogator applies more and more force to the prisoner with less and less results.” This certainly seems Batman’s situation. The Joker even seems to enjoy the beating, as a sign of his endurance or an indication of his own death drive. “The interrogator becomes intoxicated by frustration and power,” says PFC Tell in the film *The Card Counter* and it happens in *The Dark Knight Rises*: “He applies more and more force, without reason. Without result. Any man can tilt” (Schrader 2020). Batman has “tilted” so much that not only the Joker can see it, but the cops can, too. The Joker has the last word: “*You have nothing*. Nothing to threaten me with. Nothing to do with all your strength” (Nolan 2008). Those words remind



Fig. 10.4 One of the most remarked upon criminal-questionings in early twenty-first century films, both in critical studies and political discussions, President Obama himself would interpret it for his own cabinet. The interrogation that was an allegory par excellence for real-life, showing how “enhanced methods” in post-9/11 intelligence gathering could backfire. (Screenshot: *The Dark Knight* Blu-ray)

us of what is forgotten in *Zero Dark Thirty*: some of the intelligence gathered by terror suspects under American torture is used to kill Coalition forces and CIA operatives. It is an obvious trick to bring terrorists in closer to Western military and intelligence officials, but like an unwary and new chess player too intent on winning to think three moves ahead, many American interrogators cannot see they are being led in close for a mortal checkmate. Sadly, that is the case for Batman. And the Joker’s victory is not merely a physical one (causing Rachel’s death, the literal Half-Face’s creation, and an explosion at the Gotham City Jail), but a heavy psychological one. Both the criminal and law-abiding elements in Gotham recognize the Joker as besting Batman in this Gotham war against terror. In an uncanny sense, Osama bin Laden anticipated the Joker’s commentary after bin Laden, despite the odds, survived the American constant bombardment of the caves in Afghanistan:

On the morning of the 17th of Ramadan [December 3, 2001], very heavy bombing started, especially after the American leadership made sure that some of the leadership of al-Qaeda were in Tora Bora, including myself and the mujahid brother Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. ... Not a second would pass without a fighter plane passing over our heads day and night. American

forces were bombing us by smart bombs that weigh thousands of pounds and bombs that penetrate caves. We fought back against all their attacks. And we defeated them every time. In spite of all that, American forces did not dare to go into our posts. What sign is more than that for their cowardice? ... We were only 300 fighters. (Bin Laden 2006)

It is as if bin Laden reiterates Joker's line, "Nothing to do with all your strength." To survive either torture or attempts on one's life gives courage to terrorists and evidence to their movement that they are on the side "destined" to win. Whether the terrorists' faith be in the ultra-conservative Khawariji Islam originating from the First Muslim Civil War from 656–661, or in the Joker's worship of twenty-first century entropy, nihilism, and anarchy, those who dare fight the West (or even Batman) are convinced that they will not only survive but that they will repel and kill the infidels no matter how many come, no matter the sophisticated weapons the West may brandish and tracking devices they employ, no matter that whole nations or cities seem on the infidels' side. And what will first bring the enemy down will be their lies.

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Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012): Prisons, Bombs, & Catalytic Catwomen

“Fiat justitia ruat caelum”: Let justice be done though the heavens fall. The sentence first recorded in printer Johannes Jacobus Manilius’s *Locorum Communium Collectanea* would become the slogan of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–1564), who decided to accept the rise of Lutheranism in Germany and let territorial princes allow religious differences thereby making peace, though theologians warned that the heavens could collapse because of it (Manlius 1556/2008). These words, which seem the motto of the Batman-villain Bane as well, are those most repressed in *The Dark Knight* trilogy and most dangerous. Raising those words to the conscious level will be a sharp, long, breathless, and painful torture for Gotham. The lie invented and promoted by the powers that be, and not resisted by the city’s caped hero, will nearly bring its downfall—three times over. Indeed, as the typically brilliant Slavoj Žižek intuits, always with mind ready to witness the intersection where film and philosophy meet and shine their lights on each other, “paradoxically the only figure of truth in the [earlier] film [was] the Joker, its supreme villain. The aim of his terrorist attacks on Gotham is made clear: the attacks will stop only when Batman takes off his mask and reveals his true identity; to prevent this disclosure and thus protect Batman, Dent tells the press that he is Batman—another lie. In order to entrap the Joker, Batman stages his own (fake) death—yet another lie” (Žižek 2010, 59–60). In some ways, Batman’s presence and force becomes eclipsed by lies and pretenders, not only the ersatz and buf-foonish imposter-Batmen suddenly and randomly wandering Gotham,

and ill met by death in the moonlight but also by vainglorious Harvey Dent himself, who takes on the Bat-role and “unmasks” at a press conference. It is a painful wonder that Bruce Wayne loses the woman he loves to unctuous Dent, but trouble with keeping a woman (at least a law-abiding one) close to him is the bane of this superhero (Nolan 2008).

In her indispensable book on horrific faces and Gothic face coverings of all kinds (whether rubber, plastic, metal, or cloth), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas in *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces* notes a mask’s etymology may be traced “to the Arabic maskhara (to transform or falsify), while in Ancient Egypt the word mask referred to leather as a ‘second skin’” (2019). Both Carl Jung and Gaston Bachelard, she reminds us, have argued for masks being “an integral aspect of a collective human psyche, ... As the communicative source of so much expression and displayed emotion, ... the face is the core of human identity” (Heller-Nicholas 2019). A gesture as simple as hiding part of the face somehow hides all who we are. N. Ross Crumrine and Marjorie Halpin also highlight that word in its second form as a verb, as “to mask” pertains to “the ritual transformation of the human actor into a being of another order” (1983). This becoming “another order” is a feature in *The Dark Knight* trilogy, but there is deeper tension at the heart of a mask. A mask’s “presence implies,” as Heller-Nicholas wisely remembers, “a potential *unmasking*, a moment of revelation” (2019). All of *The Dark Knight* revolved around the Joker’s order to Batman to take off that mask, or else more people will die. The demand comes from the one character who cannot take off his mask. But if Batman takes off his mask, as is the case with villains in horror movies as well, he can no longer function (in part because his “normal” behaviors of restraint as Bruce Wayne would return, and his superhero-sense of boldness in anonymity would vanish—he is the billionaire often hounded by paparazzi, after all). No longer would he be feared. Unmasking will, as Heller-Nicholas argues happens in the ultimate reveal in horror movies of the mask-shedding, deactivate “the power imbued within the object itself, ... [for] the unmasking of a killer is often (but again, not always) implied to neutralise the [transformative] power it is implied the mask has granted them.... [After unmasking is] a return to the status quo” (2019). Perhaps more than any other character in the Batverse, it is the Joker who follows the famous interpretation from Michael Bakhtin on the Carnival (literally “flesh-farewell”): this ritual of masquerade powers “transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries, [and] mockery” (Bakhtin 1984, 40). Masking in Carnival as Heller-Nicholas describes it, leads to “subversion, transgression and engaging with taboos

otherwise forbidden” (2019). The Joker engages taboos constantly not only because of his madness, but because the mask is always on: his whole identity is the mask, whether the comic/TV/Movie version of the Joker has that mask put on by accident in committing of a crime (chemical exposure), parental abuse, or by his own hand. It is revealing to note, as Catherine Spooner does, how exhausting wearing the mask can become, representative of “a loss of control ... estrang[ing] the bearer from his/her ‘original’ identity, entrapping [the wearer] in a role experienced as alien to the self” (2016, 422). How often does Batman for a time want to put the mask away, until crime is so undeterred he must step out of self-imposed retirement. Batman wishes to quit crimefighting just after the mid-point of the superb *Batman Forever* (1995) as he falls in love or at the close of *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), when the Joker seems vanquished and the big lie is invented between Police Commissioner Gordon and Bruce Wayne to make Batman take the fall for the dead District Attorney Harvey Dent’s/Half Face’s abductions, murders, and alliance with the Joker’s nihilism and anarchy. Such masking follows Catherine Spooner’s definition of their Gothic role well: “Masks and veils simultaneously reveal and conceal; they foreground the inside and outside, the seen and the unseen, the self and the world” (2016). What is more, such masks in this trilogy simultaneously both cover bodies and accentuate parts of them, occlude desire yet also stimulate and reveal desire.

Bending toward a well-remarked upon Freudian obsession, the powers of the uncanny that the mask gives Batman are to make people feel fear but also to have them pause in disorientation. They seem to know his physical features from earlier contacts with Gotham’s most eligible bachelor, but still cannot place the man or fully superimpose the familiar playboy on to the face and body of the batty vigilante. Such pauses characters have as they face Wayne signal the unconscious knowing without a conscious recognition. Another creature that gives us pause is the bat, and how it dons masks of its own. From plunging into berries of the city hedgerow, fruits of the forest, stamens in our garden flowers, or better, by sucking a thick vein on a fellow mammal, Batman’s totem animal hides its identity until lifting up its head up from the feast and flying away. For the bat is a bat, but it seems for an instant a flower, a fruit, and part of a vein: the creature grows in mystery and power, like Batman himself, or what Jack Nicholson’s Joker once called “a flying mouse to kill” (in Tim Burton’s 1989 *Batman*) and the Riddler named “a rat with wings” (in Matt Reeves’ 2022 *The Batman*).

In Gothic terms, the masks of all the villains in the Batverse, but especially the Joker, evoke Edgar Allan Poe's perfect Gothic tale "The Masque of the Red Death" (that merges two strategies from the beginning of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*), whereupon the rich are wanting to escape the plague and to party on, but in a far off place away from the pestilence. It is a curious coincidence that the masks the Batverse villains wear mimic the colors of the chambers in Prince Prospero's castle from Poe, wherein this Milanese nobleman and his coterie of one thousand favored sons and daughters try to outwait the contagion: chambers that begin blue, then glow purple, green, orange, white, and ending in violet. And like that story's silently gliding villain, the Plague personified, Batman's masked or monstrously disfigured villains seem able always to come to the boardrooms of Wayne Tower, to the courtrooms of Gotham City Hall, to the Gotham City Mayor's Office, and even to the ballrooms and halls of the Wayne Mansion, as well as to the underground hideout for Batman's Research & Development, as Two-Face and the Riddler do in *Batman Forever*, and as Ra's al Ghul does in *Batman Begins*, and as Talia al Ghul and Bane will do in *The Dark Knight Rises*. All these villains are stalking presences that can get inside of the grand rooms no matter that all doors are locked. Like the wearer of the masque of the Red Death, whose presence appalled all, when the mask is taken off, there is nothing there, nothing but emptiness and mortality.

The Dark Knight Rises is the only movie in the trilogy where Batman's mask is finally ripped off for anyone to see. The medically masked Bane (like Ra's al Ghul, yet another Osama bin Laden figure in this trilogy) unmasks our hero after a fierce fight in Gotham's sewers. This is the place where the Bane-complicit thief Catwoman (Fig. 11.1) led unwary Batman to—first this complicated woman takes his mother's jewels, then she helps to take away his greatest secret. In a sense, the masks in this fighting scene make Bane and Batman complete: two former members of the League of Shadows, one is committed to Ra's al Ghul's plan to obliterate corrupt and economically predatory Gotham, and let a new city rise from its ash (possibly hundreds of years from now, as he plans a nuclear attack). The other is a hero committed to keep Gotham alive despite its seedy, predatory culture and corrupt socio-political structures. Bruce Wayne's mask lay largely on top of his head, while most of Bane's brutally injured lower face is covered by his. Bane is a haunting villain because in many ways he honestly and brutally shares what is true. First, Batman's mask offers no disguising spell on Bane, and he betrays that immediately on meeting his



Fig. 11.1 Jewels robbed again, Batman! Since *Batman Issue #1* (Spring 1941), Catwoman and Batman have repeatedly created humor and sexual tension with their good-boy-meets-bad-girl attraction that few comics ever rivalled. The chemistry heats again in *The Dark Knight Rises* with nuclear fusion foregrounding their bad romance. (Screenshot: *The Dark Knight Special Features Blu-ray*)

enemy: “Let’s not stand on ceremony here ... Mr. *Wayne*” (Nolan 2012). Once identity is established, the next ugly fact to lay bare is that Batman has fighting spirit, but his body has grown old and weaker: “Peace has cost you your strength!” Bane confides, and again it is true (2012). Batman could at this moment be thinking back to his servant Alfred’s cautions, his most sincere and knowing friend: battling the best trained foes at Bruce Wayne’s stage in life is not courage, but a disguised act of suicide. Batman can no longer endure the fight that a young, uninjured man could, and his histrionics to distract Bane—like those small and impotent bang-bang flashes Wayne throws at start of their battle—only add to the pathos. They cause Bane no stress only mirth. Batman, then, is struggling against a stronger image of himself (Fig. 11.2). Bane might have the finest line of the movie when he indirectly accuses Batman of being a dilettante of Gothic darkness, a poseur to try to fight in the shadows of evil. Bane (who lived much of his life in a prison) touches on the flashbacks that have haunted our hero: falling down the dark bat-infested well as a boy and standing in the shadowy alley where his parents lay dying. “Oh, you think darkness is your ally?”, Bane queries, “But you merely adopted the dark; I



Fig. 11.2 Beaten senseless and then imprisoned in a faraway pit by this jeering enemy in earlier scenes, Batman puts the ripped off mask on again and comes back to avenge himself against Bane. (Screenshot: Nolan 2013, *The Dark Knight Rises* Blu-ray)

was born in it, moulded by it. I didn't see the light until I was already a man, by then it was nothing to me but BLINDING! The shadows betray you, because they belong to me!" (Nolan 2012). No matter what cutting-edge technology and night-vision devices the West may boast, the world away from the light is always the terrorists' proper realm (Fig. 11.3).

The martial speech of Bane echoes bin Laden's threats, and that of Batman echoes President George W. Bush's GWOT counter-threats. Indeed George W. Bush would summon the shadows in 2002 when he made a plea to Congress to launch the Department of Homeland Security:

Today our Nation must once again reorganize our Government to protect against an often-invisible enemy, an enemy that hides in the shadows and an enemy that can strike with many different types of weapons. Our enemies seek to obtain the most dangerous and deadly weapons of mass destruction and use them against the innocent. While we are winning the war on terrorism, Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations still have thousands of trained killers spread across the globe plotting attacks against America and the other nations of the civilized world.

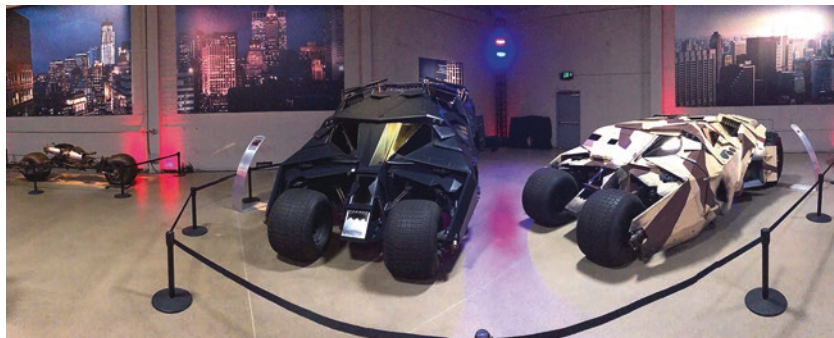


Fig. 11.3 Author inspecting Batman's genuine vehicles. The latest technology proves a handicap if systems do not exist to guard it from the horde. Batman's Tumblers—equipped with racing tires in the front and swamp tires in back, jumping from bridges and reaching speeds of 160 mph, incorporating a Batpod motorcycle and a vector-controlled jet engine, delivering explosive mine delivery from the back and machine gun fire aft—are captured by Batman's enemies Talia and Bane. This reversal echoes the threat of Jihadist enemies capturing Allied technology and weapon systems in the GWOT. (Photo of the Batpod and Tumblers driven in *The Dark Knight Rises*: By Author at Warner Brothers Studios)

To this day, however, no weapons of mass destruction have been found as President Bush warned of. In a rejoinder a year later, Osama bin Laden (like Bane) would mock the folly of fighting where the United States was unlikely to win (like Batman in the sewer works of Bane), and where the shadows would blind and envelop them: “Be glad of the good news: America is mired in the swamps of the Tigris and Euphrates. Bush is easy prey. Here he is now in an embarrassing situation, and here is America today being ruined before the eyes of the whole world. O youth of Islam everywhere, especially in [Iraq’s] neighboring countries, Jihad is your duty and rightness is your path” (bin Laden 2006). When the FBI’s most wanted fugitive Osama bin Laden finally takes off his symbolic mask and makes an unequivocal admittance to knowledge and involvement in the 9/11 attacks in 2004, just four days before Americans would vote in the election to decide for giving President Bush a second term, bin Laden also tries to lift the veil from President Bush’s motives for invading Afghanistan and Iraq. In his first State of the Union address, President Bush offered his most famed rhetorical question: “‘Why do they hate us?’ They hate what

they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (2001). Bin Laden would try to rip that rhetorical mask—“They hate our freedoms”—from the President: “I say to you that security is an important pillar of human life, and that free people do not compromise their security. Contrary to what Bush says and claims, that we hate [your] freedom. [So] why did we not attack Sweden? I wonder about you. Although we are [now in] the fourth year after 9/11, Bush is still exercising confusion and misleading you and not telling you the true reason [why you are being attacked]” (bin Laden 2006). Lies propagated by politicians, bin Laden promises (like the lies pushed by Gotham’s mayor, police commissioner, and Batman which Bane announces to all on his megaphone) will end in more civilian deaths, unless these high-placed liars, their propping up of a contaminated system of alliances, and their arms are stopped. As bin Laden would ominously conclude in this grotesque parody of a White House Oval Office chat (the terrorist dressed in golden robes and seated behind a grand desk) that seemed from a Hollywood thriller, “Therefore, the motivations are still there for what happened to be repeated. We agreed [before] with the leader of the [9/11 hijackers], Mohammed Atta, to perform all the [Twin Towers’] attacks within 20 minutes” (bin Laden 2006). These remarkable debates aside, one of the most shocking ironies of the GWOT is that while not a single weapon of mass destruction was ever found in Iraq, despite the president’s warning and all the CIA assurances that such mass murder systems were rolling on semi-trucks throughout Iraq, there were millions of smaller weapons which could enable Jihad left behind by American forces 20 years following President Bush’s confident speech.

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Matt Reeves' *The Batman* (2022): Assassinations, Gangs, & Conspiracist Riddlers

Esteemed “Batologist” and psychologist Travis Langley has argued that for *Batman*’s over 80-year presence in comics, film, and TV culture, Bruce Wayne has suffered Posttraumatic Stress. However, Langley contends, that does not necessarily give Wayne a full-blown disorder from the wounds and agony (Langley 2022). I can see how this nuanced thesis holds up over the superficial World War II-themed 1940s serials, the comic 1960s *Batman* television series (Semple 1966–1968) and 1966 movie (Martinson 1966), the deliciously campy Burton-directed films of *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), and the Joel Schumacher-directed and Tim Burton-produced *Batman Forever* (1995) complete with Nicole Kidman’s smoldering psychologist who keeps trying to analyze the early traumas inside both Bruce Wayne and Batman (flirting with both, but finally finding Batman sexy and Wayne a bore). I comprehend, too, how trauma in the animated Batman series starting in 1992, developed by Bruce Timm, Paul Dini, and Mitch Brian, does not leave Batman fully dysregulated. Moreover, director Joel Schumacher’s *Batman & Robin* (1997) where a psychologist again appears and Wayne discloses more and warms to the notion living within a kind of family, Wayne does show many but not all of the hallmarks of PTSD, and we may say that these symptoms do not leave him maladapted to life. Even in one of the most traumatic treatments of Batman which will include intense terrorism scenes and battles along with a nuclear threat, Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*

Trilogy, I still see Wayne functional: he is able to sleep, has his pleasures and hobbies, regulates himself and his anger, shows a refreshing sense of humor (at himself), laughs, and enjoys sex with dangerous women (Ra's al Ghul's daughter Talia) without much fear and trembling. Certainly, Wayne is injured mentally and physically; definitely, he is troubled by frequent intrusive thoughts and memories of his parents being shot down in an alley. Yet, all that is not PTSD—not an actual distressing disorder that renders him helpless—but a composite of *some* post-traumatic symptoms.

Where I would part with Langley, the bestselling guru of Batman studies, is with *The Batman* (headed by Robert Pattinson). Langley does not perceive Batman as suffering PTSD here. Yet in this filmic iteration, Wayne is a near hermit for most of the movie, moves and speaks in an especially slow, almost drugged pace (except when he has to fight, where he cannot control himself and has to be pulled off suspects before killing them), and often looks in a sulky, drugged, and depressive trance. Some of the songs in the movie, with a 1980s Kurt Cobain Grunge mood, accentuate the unrelenting mental darkness that is Bruce Wayne. Wayne in his cave seems to have suicidal ideation. Later, he merely glances at the food Alfred offers him, a few berries, with no appetite for food or life at all. His depressed outlook makes him seem nearly friendless—even very suspicious of Alfred for much of the film. Most alarmingly, he is the most cynical Batman when it comes to perceiving human nature that I have witnessed. Everyone, he believes, is in on the take. Nearly everyone is selling their honor (their bodies, illegal drugs, or their office to protect the Gotham organized crime racket). He trusts Lieutenant James Gordon (perfectly realized by Jeffrey Wright), but that is only one of two people he shows belief in from all of Gotham. Moreover, he seems unable to return Catwoman Selina Kyle's (Zoe Kravitz's) kisses: his lips seem frozen. What's wrong with this man? She cannot figure it out, and neither can we. There is almost no flirtation: only a compulsion to relive his parent's loss and feel how now in death they are now being corrupted by scandal. His Mother had a covered-up mental illness, and his Father paid off the gangster Falcone to shut up a nosy reporter who will share the story. Falcone "takes care" of the story for good, and the reporter is killed, which gives the corruption-despising Riddler, intensely conjured by Paul Dano, one more motive for attacking the Wayne legacy. One of the few times that this Bruce Wayne (barely) shows emotion besides black depression in this whopping 176-minute film is when he sees the Mayor's severed thumb attached to a thumb drive, complete with scandalous pictures of the Mayor with a mistress who worked at one of the Penguin's clubs where the consumption of

illicit drugs and prostitutes was the order of the night. He smiles in this scene, almost. Moving on to chasing criminals, we realize that Batman in all the movies is dangerous on the road when in pursuit of a malefactor, but in this film, he chases the Penguin (acted by Colin Farrell with sleaziest perfection) at high speeds relentlessly through Gotham for many minutes, upending semi-trucks and other vehicles in the process, causing severe injury or death to the innocent. And yet, he knows where the Penguin works and could drop in on him any time, as he did earlier: no car chase was ever necessary then. This Batman shows the most reckless disregard for life that can be remembered in the Bat-opus, and often exhibits the thousand-yard stare of veterans consumed by PTSD after too much witnessing of death or causing too much murder themselves. Even the Penguin thinks Batman is dangerously out of his mind and disdains him as a “batshit cop,” a “crazy,” and no hotshot-polyglot when it comes to the Riddler’s clues. Daft Batman does not know basic words and their correct definite articles in Spanish for animals. “No habla Espanol?” asks an exasperated Penguin in Brooklyn-accented rage as he stares at Batman in a deserted locale post-chase (Reeves 2022).

One of the features of this film that interests Batman yet might send him into even more dysfunction, dysregulation, and despair is that the abductions, tortures, and killing of the Riddler’s high-profile Gotham on-the-take politicians, major money-launderers, and drug-peddling elites are uncannily like crude Jihadist techniques. The Riddler is hiding his identity often with dark tape, not unlike an ISIS or Al Qaeda executioner’s crude black hood. There are suicide vests attached to corrupt city officials like the district attorney (Fig. 12.1) right out of photographs of terrorists seen during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. There is an obsession with live executions of the abductees as seen on channels run by Islamic extremists. There is a live recruiting drive for new members to become Riddler supporters by disguising themselves like him, grabbing grenades and shotguns and trying to kill major figures and bring the city’s safety to the brink of collapse. Again, like Al Qaeda, cells are made operative quickly (Perliger 2020). Riddler’s daring and his screaming against the corruption of Gotham radicalize people who might not know each other: they are activated to violence by the Riddler’s messages in real time on social media platforms. This domestic terrorism is modeled on two decades of foreign terrorism (Perliger 2020). There is, too, the cycle of post-traumatic concern that comes like a ghost after the initial terrorism which Derrida presents in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic



Fig. 12.1 Confessions, strapping victims (here the District Attorney) with explosives, and Internet execution-spectacles are the Riddler's preference, showing how the methods of Al Qaeda and ISIS have become the modes of domestic terrorists in Gotham. (Screenshot: *The Batman* Blu-ray)

Suicides" (2003). But this time in *The Batman*, it will not be the Scarecrow's death by an aerosol causing zombie-like violence and madness as in *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005), not by the Joker's fire and exploding ferries and hospitals and falling towers as in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), or by Bane and Talia al Ghul's converted dirty bomb as in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan 2012). The plan by the Riddler is to drown Gotham by breaking its walls holding back the sea. Those still left living may face death by dehydration, starvation, or by the hands of looters before the federal government can launch a plan to save Gotham at the end of the movie.

When Batman opens the Riddler's tormenting greeting cards at a glacial pace and reads them as if the movie is in slow motion, we wonder what is wrong with him. When the District Attorney is loaded up with explosives in a crude but effective ISIS-styled suicide vest, our shadowy superhero shuffles away inexplicably almost in slow motion as the countdown commences to explosion, and of course is hurled to the floor and has his hearing damaged. This is one of the most suicidal reactions to a ticking bomb in the Batverse. It is as if he wants to die in that cathedral with the District Attorney (a finely wheedling Peter Sarsgaard) and with the already dead Mayor Don Mitchell, Jr. (acted by Rupert Penry-Jones), whose casket lies nearby.

The Batman's moments with Catwoman (another orphan like Bruce) when they fall on each other are the only place where the slowness seems understandable and appreciated (Fig. 12.2). All this delayed reaction elsewhere suggests some cognitive damage in the Bat brain. His weary eyes sometimes raise up to the camera for a long steady gaze, but often they are downcast in a kind of lithium-loaded, inwardly lost expression. The effect is limitlessly sad: we feel great empathy for Bruce Wayne and what killing has done to his family and his spirit, but we cannot imagine what will lift him from the suffering.

Only the third orphan in this tryptic gets Batman to pound on the glass of the suspect's holding cell and show more liveliness than seen elsewhere in the movie. We find our answer: it is an enemy that energizes the Batman and lifts him from torpor (for a while). It is the Riddler himself, understandably seething with rage since childhood at how the Gotham child welfare and fostering system has failed him. The fund that Wayne Enterprises had for city renewal, charities, orphanages, and social causes was misused. Corrupt powers—gang boss Falcone and others—used it to siphon funds, launder money, and dodge taxes. The monies needed for the orphans never came. Lies of the city managers helped drug kingpins



Fig. 12.2 Batman asks questions of the Iceberg Lounge and discovers Catwoman's traumas from girlhood, as Gotham sleeps unaware of the coming deluge. (Screenshot: *The Batman* Blu-ray)

continue despite “biggest drug bust in Gotham history,” as earlier reported on the covers of the Gotham newspaper and local television (Reeves 2022). Fake news ruled until the Riddler showed up. Again, like a terrorist commander, the Riddler takes the stage to condemn the hypocrisy and lies and death caused by those in power. The cops and mayor are protecting Falcone, the drug man who is their de facto supervisor.

Thus, when the Riddler is finally apprehended and the Batman visits him in a Gotham jail, we hear the tragic stories that form the real news: every year at least one baby would freeze to death in the Gotham orphanage, the rooms were packed with dozens of children, and the Riddler woke one night screaming as he felt rats biting his fingertips. The conditions are abject, but what reporters would touch the abuse in the orphanage story, seeing how one of them was killed off by Carmine Falcone by daring to report on Wayne family’s hidden vulnerabilities and irregularities? The covered-up details may drive Batman to greater depths of weariness increasing his PTSD. Though his butler and only friend Alfred (Andy Serkis) assures Bruce that his father Thomas Wayne wanted nothing to do with that killing—and only wanted to make the story go away to protect Bruce’s mother—who can say now that is true? The city’s unofficial ruler Falcone confesses to the Batman in perfectly soft yet threatening mob-speak (before the Riddler shoots him dead) what no one else would. Some honesty comes out of the mouth of the crooked kingpin unavailable elsewhere, underplayed from John Turturro in tomcat tones that could have come out of the mouth of Don Corleone: “[Your father] said ‘Carmine, I want you to put the fear of God in this guy’. And when fear isn’t enough. . . . Your father wanted me to handle it, so I did. I *handled* it” (Reeves 2022). This is counterbalanced by another voice, though. Batman’s voiceover at the movie’s beginning is altogether bleak, we recall. By the end of the film, it has a lyrical hope: “Our scars can destroy us. Even after the physical wounds have healed. But if we survive them, they can transform us. They can give us the power to endure, and the strength to fight” (Reeves 2022). The question is whether Batman, especially in his new more active altruism and saving of people who were destined to drown, will “survive” these unhealable wounds of losing his parents, his disbelief in humanity, and the strain of being lied to for much of his life. Bruce’s father had threatened to rat on Falcone to the cops the day before he died, but would Thomas Wayne have carried that noble threat out? Valet Alfred Pennyworth still wonders on the sins of the father. So do we, and so does Bruce Wayne, the cry of his soul reverberating like an old Nirvana song in our minds, Kurt Cobain’s “Something in the Way,” the sound of a forever wounded son.

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PART V

Video Games



Gonzalo Frasca's *Kabul Kaboom!* (2002) and *September 12th: A Toy World* (2003): Motherhood, Blood, & Mortar Gunners

Just when the world thought America's foreign policies were among the most militaristic among major powers along came the merciless Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and people around the world reconsidered which country most threatened international peace and stability or which nation was most likely to launch a pre-emptive strike. Poll after poll two years after 9/11/2001 (administered in Europe) had Europeans consistently ranking the United States as the greatest threat to international tranquility and security. China, in the same polling, emerged from Europeans polled as a more responsible superpower and nuclear state than the United States and a more reliable guarantor of world peace. That view would flip by 2020, the Pew Research Center reported in September 2022, with majorities in all save two advanced economies surveyed having very low or no faith in President Xi Jinping's approach to international affairs. Through the end of winter and beginning of summer in 2022, President Vladimir Putin quickly worsened the equation, lowering global views for both Russia and its most important partner China, according to the German Marshall Fund's annual survey of public attitudes. Minds of millions focused on Russia, and the country (and allies of said country) became the current greatest transgressor of boundaries and danger to international stability, world food distribution (from attacks and blockages against Ukraine's agricultural exports and the conflict leaving fields uncultivated), and even human existence with its nuclear

saber-rattling around the world. Blaming America first was less easy now and decidedly out of fashion. In Europe, changes thought impossible since the end of World War II became real: Germany voted to spend a billion Euros on its defense and to send defensive weapons to Ukraine. Countries long famed for neutrality like Switzerland decided to freeze Russian assets. Other countries, like Finland and Sweden, that had never formally asked to join NATO since the end of World War II suddenly had debates in their parliaments to enter NATO and formerly applied to join and were accepted. On the ground in Ukraine, in a matter of just a month, Pentagon sources suggested that Russia had lost 7000 of its own soldiers (more than all the Americans soldier dead from both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined for the whole of the conflicts). The Russians and their mercenaries had killed thousands of Ukrainian soldiers, along with male and female civilians who had suddenly joined a people's army. The Russian Federation had damaged Ukrainian nuclear installations and had launched hypersonic missiles in Ukraine. And the Russians by March 2022 had attacked a base and killed over 30 soldiers in Ukraine merely 10 miles from the border of a NATO member (Poland), a base used by American training personnel only a month before. Ukrainian civilians were trying to escape the war-ravaged nation and were huddling for shelter in hospitals or theaters which were subsequently bombed by the Russians, leaving one to wonder how long Ukraine can hold back from launching devastating and defensible terrorist attacks on Russia itself. Including a photograph of a President Putin seemingly in a trance and unaware or uncaring of human pain caused for millions who lost families, homes, and country, Shadi Hamid's review of global problems in 2022 and previous worries about American hegemony was now aptly titled for *The Atlantic*: "There Are Many Things Worse Than American Power" Hamid (2022).

I predict, then, that no war video game will be more popular in this second decade of the millennium than those with an *Ukraine Resistance* theme and setting. The global gaming sales market is expected to hit a whopping record \$222 billion in 2022 (Freer 2022), so there should be ample money to invest in Ukrainian set games. Russians and Russian mercenaries (along with Arabs and Iranians) have already been one of the most popular enemy targets in war video games in the decades following 2001, and soon we will see more images of them on video game screens. President Putin's war that seemed deliberately to target apartment blocks and shopping malls will be remembered not only through novels and film, but possibly more memorably and definitely more interactively through video games. This could usher massive profitability to companies with the

market foresight to make them, as some war game franchises have shown before, especially *Call of Duty* starting in 2003 from Activision which reports over 400 million game sales, and ranks in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the best-selling first-person shooter series (Lynch 2014). I foresee that we will have the option to choose to play a Ukrainian soldier in the heroic and resourceful fight of the people of Ukraine against one of the largest and most merciless military machines in the world, a war machine that will roll over and drop bombs on civilians without question, as previous Russian attacks that leveled cities in Syria and Chechnya have shown. Until this time comes of *Ukraine Resistance* and *Repel the Russians* and *Assassin's Assignment: Moscow* gaming, which I would enjoy playing, many of the video games dealing with contemporary wars will continue the trend based on America's invasions and occupations of places (largely in the Middle East) that are facing insurgency or that have been largely destroyed by human-made disruption of nature (like sandstorms in Dubai exacerbated by Global Warming in *Spec Ops: The Line* [Davis and Coulon 2012]) or by outright military attacks (the nuclear holocaust of the Middle East in *Call of Duty: Ghosts* [Gaghan (2013)]).

We have already examined in detail some of America's and the Coalition's fatal flaws in real-life Iraq (including the use of white phosphorus at the deadliest battle in the Iraqi war, Fallujah, resulting in one of the highest losses of civilian life and a possible war crime) and the American and NATO murderous mistakes in Afghanistan (including drone attacks on innocent families—one of the final losses on our hands was a former translator and family for Western forces). However, other countries around the globe, especially Russia, are willing to murder *en masse* (including firing into bread lines with half-starving people and bombing buses ferrying civilians down escape corridors out of Ukrainian cities, all of which had been agreed to safe passage earlier by the belligerents in the conflict). Their media will not be allowed to cover the vindictive and civilian-targeted story without the possibility of a 15-year prison sentence, closing of the news bureau, or even murder by security services of the Russian Federation or their proxies. It is also a grateful reminder that for all the irreparable harm done in the America's name, we at least have both a Fourth Estate and Fifth Estate to report upon it. Even in a time of embedding reporters in Western military troop advances within OIF and OEF, with all the limits on free reportage that entails, there is still a chance the dark truths could be seen in the day, and people at home could push for change and elections be decided on the mistakes and misdeeds of mindless warcraft. The irony of President Putin calling Ukraine a neo-Nazi state as his forces bombarded Mariupol or

Bucha in a style that evoked the German Nazi war machine's destruction of Stalingrad was the lie and warped cover of a war atrocity that shocked the world, but could not be safely reported in Russia. Similarly, our first game's art by Gonzalo Frasca takes its Picasso painting-cues from the bombing of Guernica, Spain, by the German Luftwaffe's Condor Legion and Italy's Aviazione Legionaria, on behalf of coup-leader Francisco Franco, showing their deadly skills against a civilian population.

I want to investigate video games that have all appeared somewhere on what the Uruguayan-born game designer Gonzalo Frasca calls the "news-game" spectrum or games that have the influence of real events upon them, generating discovery and arousing empathy. Such games are not mindless entertainment or "a mode of escapism, or symptomatic of the no-socializing malaise of the millennial generation" (Rachovitsky-Duarte 2021). Instead, such games exist, at least in part as Clive Thompson reasons about *Peacemaker* and *Darfur is Dying*, "to intrigue [players] long enough so that they poke around and figure out the underlying argument: an op-ed composed not of words but of action" (Thompson 2006).

Frasca had been wondering about games on trauma before he attempted any. In one of his most ethically probing essays he writes, "Interestingly, as far as we know, the only games that explore the Holocaust are underground pro-Nazi videogames... . The player was offered to take the role of a concentration camp administrator and had to coordinate mass murders" (Frasca 2000). But if such sordid, even obscene games exist, why don't the opposite games manifest, too? "Why is it that this topic just inspired racist videogames? Why, then, did anybody not try to develop a humanist game about the Holocaust? We can think of a possible answer: a computer game through the eyes of a Holocaust victim might be perceived as even more monstrous than a neo-Nazi game" (Frasca 2000). It might be that as "low" of a form as comics can take on the GWOT, and of course film and novels can, but somehow a game suggests play, and often (though not always) winners and losers, and play should be forbidden to define or depict tragedy. Or should it? Perhaps the answer is that video games are always participatory media, and as Frasca argues elsewhere: "Authors should trust their players to, well, participate. It should be obvious, but most of traditional storytelling bags of tricks do not perform well in games. Game designers should not play at being the next Spielberg or Coppola because game authorship is not about crafting sequences of events but about modelling worlds with rules" (qtd. in Staff 2008). Yet, one could take the opposite stance: that approach of modeling worlds with rules, where the rules might be suddenly broken, seems the essence of traumatic storytelling.

Frasca, who was on an international flight to America on 9/11/2001 and seems still traumatized by it, designed a game in 2003, just half a year after the American and NATO invasion of Afghanistan. A game to play for free on his website, it was simple enough to need no special controls or long study of game play rules: *September 12th: A Toy World* (Frasca 2003a). Bare but effective in design, it soon had millions of hits and game plays, and it warned (through player's example) of the increase of terrorism that comes from firing at terrorists but still killing many civilians along with the chief targets. Frasca had an earlier remarkable game as well based on the news of collateral damage: *Kabul Kaboom!* Frasca (2002). In 2001, he was a Master's student at Georgia Tech in their Information, Design, and Technology program just completing his work. Being in America as a Uruguayan as the USA suffered its greatest terrorism attack, watching it unleash its shock-and-awe firepower onto nations in the Middle East, and rounding up darker-complexioned suspects (especially in Los Angeles and New York) could understandably have traumatized him. Influenced by the bleak news leaking from the Afghanistan war, "in which American supply drops had crushed people and structures as they fell from the sky ... [all a] mix of violence and humanitarianism" (Bogost et al. 2010), he designed his 2002 game, *Kabul Kaboom!* Here hungry civilians in Afghanistan try to catch American hamburgers falling from the sky, while they also try outrun and hide from American bombs descending on the Afghan capital. The mother-avatar catching hamburgers appears much like the Basque woman at the far right side of Picasso's 1937 *Guernica*, her arms reached to the sky and her mouth open in shock. Frasca remembers the inspiration vividly:

I was on a plane on September 11th, 2001. A few months later, I needed to do a US coast-to-coast flight. I decided to do an experiment: writing a game about the current events (the war in Afghanistan) while flying. The result was *Kabul Kaboom!*, a reflection on the so-called "humanitarian war," where American troops were bombing the Afghans with both food supplies and missiles. Later that night I posted the game on my blog and forgot about it. A few days later, to my surprise, it was being played by thousands of persons. It was my first newsgame. (Qtd. in Staff 2008)

As a parallel, during the Vietnam War, one of the most famous battles against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces occurred at the kill site in spring of 1969 that GIs dubbed "Hamburger Hill" (officially on American military maps as Hill 937) for the many strewn bodies on this rise at the

Vietnam/Laotian border resembling ground beef. (U.S. forces tried to take ascend it over ten times.) Likewise, one game academic makes a compelling case that Frasca's use of the hamburger "not only textually puns the common slang term for 'mutilated bodies,' but it also acts as a symbol for American consumerism and imperialism" (Rachovitsky-Duarte 2021). Another finds that "the game continues until the player can no longer keep up with the onslaught. ... One can scarcely play *Kabul Kaboom!* For more than a few seconds. The barrage of bombs simply makes it impossible to collect the food" (Bogost 2007, 85). Prominent game theorist Shuen-shing Lee calls the game a "no-exit place of constant warfare" (Lee 2003), which I take as an apt description of Afghanistan's traumatized war history. Another game scholar perceptively summarizes the three values of the game as survival (eating "the unhealthy, American food"), autonomy (the "avatar is alone and has no protection except avoidance"), and pressing close to family (the "avatar is of a mother holding her child") (Rachovitsky-Duarte 2021). A voiceover to this bleak game announces "MMMMM! YUMMMY!" while we see "the depiction of the mutilated avatar. These minced pieces of monotone flesh are arbitrarily placed in front of a real, black-and-white photograph of two Afghan men watching the cleanup of their homes turned wreckage" (Rachovitsky-Duarte 2021). As a player, I feel shocked and powerless by the end of the game. However, what if you invented a game that does not have the merciful structure that provides the release of an ending?

Kabul Kaboom! is a simple but haunting game to play, though it is overshadowed by Frasca's deadening *September 12th: A Toy Story*, a video game without a conclusion, one where the missiles never run out and no score is kept. *September 12th* features a screen with people moving through city blocks with highly unrealistic buildings somewhere in a busy Iraq. Despite its clunky look, this game generates traumatic feelings during play. We are shown four images: a cartoonishly drawn terrorist and equally cartoonish drawings of non-terrorist men, women, children (and some street dogs). The game asks us to kill the terrorists in a city where the civilians have not been evacuated. Game critic Ian Bogost (who was teaching in the Georgia Tech department where Frasca took his game-design Master's degree), Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer describe the moral morass of this game perfectly. The counter-terrorism adrenaline (Fig. 13.1) hits when gamers "spot the caricature of a familiar figure: white keffiyeh bound tightly to his forehead, AK-47 in hand" (Bogost et al. 2010). Then the interactive experience becomes much more complicated and layered:



Fig. 13.1 A missile we have fired against terrorists is about to land on civilians. (Screenshot from playing: *September 12th: A Toy World*)

You control a reticle with your mouse, the kind of crosshair seen when playing a first-person shooter. Your targeting circle is relatively large, much bigger than the buildings and people below, who move rapidly as they go about their business. Carefully isolating your target, you wait for the terrorist to walk into an uninhabited sector of the city and you click, expecting instant gratification and success. Instead, there is delay. The terrorist begins moving away. A woman, two children, and a dog walk into the targeted areas. Finally, a missile [your missile] strikes the marketplace. It does not discriminate, shattering bodies and buildings alike. Bloodied human limbs litter the streets. Smoke settles from the rubble. When civilians pass by the dead, they drop to their knees, crying. Eventually mourning turns to anger, and a citizen morphs into a figure with black robe, keffiyeh, and automatic rifle—a new terrorist is born. (Bogost et al. 2010)

The conflict between each new click that wishes to execute a “clean” kill and the emergence of more terrorists as a result of one’s collateral damage becomes painful even in a game whose graphics are the opposite of real. What the three critics/game makers do not reveal above, as I note from my gameplay of *September 12th*, is how rapidly this tragedy happens. One is constantly trying to send missiles at terrorists who move like the

four ghosts of *Pac-Man*. Like a Las Vegas gambling house, the video game seems to give success to the beginner and lure him or her on. One clicks to fire at an insurgent, the missile is delayed but finally shot, and it lands into a cell house with jihadists, but kills far more bystanders. Then crying is heard from women on the streets of this game. I have watched players sweat and curse as they play: but who are they cursing? Iraqi civilians for being at the wrong place and wrong time? The slow dispatch from pressing “fire” to missile launch, that the lead time does not factor how movements on the ground will change? Are we yelling at the terrorists? Or are we blasting ourselves? Or all of these? I tend to think that we are castigating ourselves—this is a game that makes us feel more troubled about our enabling and complicity. Yet pride makes us loathe to give up the controls: if we play for just a few minutes more, our gaming instinct says, we are bound to make useful corrections. We have not time to tally the unintended deaths while in the middle of play. But when the game closes, we realize those corrections never were made, and the body count is egregiously high.

In some fashion, these furiously fast figures we must “neutralize” and then maddeningly slow launches of firepower combine to create games that are shaming puzzles of derangement and malice. They involve us deeply because though we do not set them up, or make their rules (if there are rules), we do make an investment of time (and sometimes money with other games than Frasca’s), feeling compelled to finish them even if frustrated by them or implicated by them as a killer. In *September 12th*, we find as we play both some sensations of guilt and sadness, a sense of futility, and some information we did not expect—about the villains, the heroes in the game, and our morally ambiguous role. Frasca’s inspired instructions for the game are only nine ominous sentences long:

This is not a game.

You can’t win and you can’t lose.

This is a simulation.

It has no ending.

It has already begun.

The rules are deadly simple.

You can shoot.

Or not.

This a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror. (Frasca 2003b *September 12th*)

There is a warning that we will kill people here, but it does not register until we are hearing the passersby and house residents weep as they leave their doorways and see death in the street by our hand. *September 12th* humanizes these blockish game figures, an empathic trait develops that most first-person shooter games never allow to flow inside players.

When returning GWOT veterans are connected to a virtual reality headset in real life to play a game called *Virtual Iraq*, as its namer/developer and UCLA clinical psychologist Albert Rizzo observes, it is both the fire of bullets *and* the cry of a baby in war time that similarly accelerates their “blood pressure, respiration, heart rate, and stress level” as measured by electrodes (Halpern 2008). Veterans playing such video games can benefit from a kind of exposure therapy, if guided by a trauma therapist who understands what stimuli to select for the player and what degree to intensify it. For OIF or OEF veterans, they seem to be back “in the driver’s seat of the Humvee, ... or in the turret behind a machine gun ... at dusk, midday; with snipers, without snipers; driving fast, creeping along; the sound of a single mortar, the sound of multiple mortars ... Engaging the patient on so many sensory levels that the immersion in the environment is nearly absolute” (Halpern 2008). Hyper-avoidance of a situation that causes us fear often causes its own stress. Going back to a safer version of the danger’s source, ironically, can liberate many sufferers. Exposure therapy, according to American Psychological Association, has “been scientifically demonstrated to be a helpful treatment” in reducing anxiety, panic, and recurring sleeplessness caused by PTSD through four ways:

Habituation: Over time, people find that their reactions to feared objects or situations decrease.

Extinction: Exposure can help weaken previously learned associations between feared objects, activities or situations and bad outcomes.

Self-efficacy: Exposure can help show the client that he/she is capable of confronting his/her fears and can manage the feelings of anxiety.

Emotional processing: During exposure, the client can learn to attach new, more realistic beliefs about feared objects, activities or situations, and can become more comfortable with the experience of fear. (APA Staff 2017)

I believe that the unfolding of either the perpetrator’s secrets and the victim’s suffering is the ultimate factor for why some war video games can move us and have resonance long after we play them, especially if the “smart bombs” are fatally inaccurate, slow-launched, or misdelivered. Frasca is critiquing the win-lose logic of games and the “concept of an

achievable victory condition, where in real life there might be none ... [as] the United States' strategy of bombing terrorists from a distance will only serve to produce more terrorists in a never ending cycle of revenge and retaliation" (Monnens 2011, 91–92).

In some less resonant video games, other than those I delve into in this book, the victims from the player's gun actually disappear in a poof. The absent body means less guilt and many happy returns to game play. Tobi Smethurst correctly points out that *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* Goodrich (2012), for instance, has "the game's generic Middle Eastern enemies function as little more than pop-up target dummies, the knocking-down of which is a curious mix of the visceral and the clinical. The player's gun sounds realistic enough, and the enemies do react in pain, shout, fall over, and writhe in their death throes, but their bodies are given to disappearing" (Smethurst 2015, 154). Perhaps this decision was taken to not over-tax the game's hardware. Perhaps, as Smethurst optimistically opines, this decision of its designer company Danger Close (dissolved in 2013) to "disappear" the bodies was so that the game "highlights the dehumanization of the enemy which real-life soldiers must maintain in order to do their job" (Smethurst 2015, 154). This hypothesis of that game corporation looking at what violence does to its perpetrators seems too generous, though. Even Smethurst cannot accept it, and finally settles more jadedly on what seems more realistic and profit-driven case: *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* "features othered characters as enemies in order to allow its audience the pleasure of guilt-free, simulated violence against opponents who are already dehumanised in the real world, and are therefore doubly so in the virtual one" (Smethurst 2015, 154). Like crematoria trucks creeping into Ukraine from Russian and Belarus in February 2022 to burn the remains of their own soldiers—or to render slaughtered Ukrainian civilians into untraceable ash that will offer meager evidence at war crimes trials—such video games make the dead vanish to absolve us. But fighting against this "missing dead" trend in games, I would like to explore other video games that do not let the players keep such an easy conscience.

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Cory Davis and Francois Colon's *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012): CIA, Renegades, & Missing Civilians

With the four anti-Terrorism games I wish to dissect here, there is the mission to liquidate terrorists to make a safer world (or in *Spec Ops: The Line*, to blot out an American force that is operating like a terror group in a political vacuum). That higher mission, however, is soon torn apart by the dependence on military agents to subdue terrorists whose anti-Western and pro-Islamist ideologies are not to be killed. For how does one kill an ideology cherished by millions on the ground, and whose belief is strengthened every time the death of an innocent Afghan or Iraqi civilian is witnessed? Rather than being preached at in an op-ed about our country's failures and sins, or hearing it second hand, we take in the information from our own hands that pressed to shoot and our own eyes which saw the civilian sink fast. My analysis of the ideological ambiguity that strains inside these anti-terror video games is that they at first offer a U.S. Marine's gung-ho vociferousness, a straining to accomplish the mission or what game theorists call achieving a "victory condition." To understand that hunger to meet and defeat the enemy, we can travel with embedded reporters on real missions of engagement. One embedded reporter Tara Brown, for *60 Minutes Australia*, records the thoughts of one American Marine in a Humvee on a 2006 search and destroy mission against the Taliban after dusk and then by day, where things were calm and suddenly violent. The Marine tells here: "They like the night, they like the moon, they like the mountaintops. ... [During the day] they talk on the radios

but they never wanna come out an' play. Yeah. If I go somewhere an' I'm gonna be away from my family, *We need to play*. ... OH, *Incoming*. Yeah. OH, *right there!*" (qtd. in Brown 2006, min. 10:40-11:10). Video games of war have an appetite for destruction as this Marine's, but then these four particular video games I address settle the player into a guilty morass. As Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer accurately observe, buttressed by articles from *The Times of London*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, "terrorism cannot be attacked surgically, and violence begets more violence" (2010). However, the point is not to preach this to gamers but to let them experience it firsthand. I echo, then, what game theorist Miguel Sicart finds: that "the game has the ability to turn its player into a moral being, by stimulating ethical reasoning rather than telling players its message outright" (qtd. in Bogost et al. 2010).

Definitely one of the most fascinating, sobering, and plot-twisted GWOT games for exploring perpetrator guilt is *Spec Ops: The Line* (Davis and Coulon 2012). If there is a game that ushers the feeling of shame and moral collapse and chaos about U.S. government and military's Mideastern misadventures, it is this one, akin to the ways the film *Apocalypse Now* condemns U.S. Asian military misadventures. Released by America's 2K Games at the same time for play on Playstation 3, Xbox, and PC, it was developed by Yager Development in Germany. Before we speak of caustic *Spec Op's* rumble of culpability, it is worth noting the difficulty of creating a game that troubles players. Director Francis Ford Coppola announced a plan to develop one of his own films from 1979 into a video game, one of the most agonizing movies about U.S. militarism—*Apocalypse Now*—which Robert Ebert called "the best Vietnam film, one of the greatest of all films, because ... it is not about war so much as about how war reveals truths we would be happy to never discover" (Ebert 1979/1999). In Coppola's words, that video game transfer started with grand hope: "Forty years ago, I set out to make a personal art picture that could hopefully influence generations of viewers for years to come. Today, I'm joined by new daredevils, a team who want to make an interactive version of *Apocalypse Now*, where you are Captain Benjamin Willard amidst the harsh backdrop of the Vietnam War" (qtd. in Staff 2017). But after two failed attempts to gain just \$900,000 on crowdsource funding, the game was cancelled as of 2022. We remember Coppola's war film, winning Academy Awards for best cinematography and best sound, featured U.S. Army Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) on a classified mission to kill an AWOL U.S. Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who is in a remote jungle of Vietnam, causing tribulation for military command and being worshipped

like a god by the Vietnamese and one American combat photographer disciple (Dennis Hopper). Willard finds his Kurtz-like god-man/soldier king who takes orders only from “the jungle,” yet is in awe of him as well, though still chops him dead with a machete and carries away the demigod’s writings. Gamers may never get to play *Apocalypse Now* on their screens and experience what may be the ultimate war film on a more inter-actively traumatic level, at least not while Coppola is still alive to consult on it. However, *Spec Ops: The Line* does offer some of the ambiguities, death, and dark self-discovery of *Apocalypse Now*, placing it in another exotic location, a future Dubai after an apocalyptic sandstorm (Fig. 14.1). Two individuals are at the heart of the game: United States Army’s Delta Force Captain Martin Walker (who treks and shoots through Dubai with two soldiers in the squad below him named Lugo and Adams), all in an attempt to find and rescue anyone still alive from an aborted operation, including the leader of the Dubai evacuation, Lieutenant Colonel John Konrad. Konrad (whose identical sounding surname to the author of *Heart of Darkness* [Conrad 1899/2016] who loosely inspired *Apocalypse Now* seems too close to be accidental) emerges in the game as a Kurtz figure of dream and dark reality. A layer more is that Konrad was Walker’s commanding officer earlier in the War of Terror in Afghanistan, and Konrad prevented Walker’s death there.

Captain Walker uncovers that Lieutenant Colonel Konrad’s soldiers (AKA the “Damned 33rd”) refused command to leave the city and have



Fig. 14.1 Dubai in ruins. (Screenshot from trailer: *Spec Ops: The Line*)

instituted martial law. Walker doubles his determination to find them. As startling a discovery is that the radio voice of Konrad has been an auditory hallucination all along conjured by Walker's PTSD from the atrocities he saw in Afghanistan. Tobi Smethurst describes the building conflict and resulting player choices elegantly:

The player is given a choice at the end of the game: have Walker shoot himself, or have him shoot a hallucinatory image of Konrad. The latter option leads to three more choices for the player: a few days later, as a rescue party of US soldiers arrives at the Burj Khalifa, where the final confrontation with "Konrad" took place, a dazed and battle-scarred Walker emerges to meet them, carrying an assault shotgun and wearing Konrad's uniform jacket (an allusion to the fact that "Konrad" was really part of Walker all along). When a member of the rescue party asks Walker to drop his weapon, the player is given the option to comply, and return with them, or to fire on the troops. (Smethurst 2015, 144)

This recognition of the monster within that comes too late—even after killing Dubai civilians in a white phosphorus attack with Walker's involvement—is the haunting element that transcends typical war video game play. What elevates this game to the storytelling intensity of textual novels, graphic novels, or film is that painful and uncanny identification of ourselves with all the trouble. We are the terrorist we have come to destroy. We are what Lacan called the "knowledge that doesn't know itself," which Žižek identifies as "the core of fantasy" (Žižek 2009). That knowledge is that the soldiers will become the destroyers of those whom they are pledged to protect. When we think of Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* and in *Heart of Darkness*, and the Konrad-inside-Walker in *Spec Ops: The Line*, we are benefited by an insight of Slavoj Žižek on *Apocalypse Now*. Though not stated formally, I intuit that Žižek senses that what Kurtz has seen led to his madness. As evidence of that, Žižek attests that Kurtz is that "total Master who dares to confront face to face the Real of terrifying *jouissance*: ... presented not as a remainder of some barbaric past, but as the necessary outcome of the modern Western power itself" (Žižek 2005). This brilliant point is abetted by Žižek's claim, which I would agree to, that "Kurtz was a perfect soldier—as such, through his over-identification with the military power system, he turned into the excess which the system has to eliminate. The ultimate horizon of *Apocalypse Now* is this insight into how Power generates its own excess which it has to annihilate in an

operation which has to imitate what it fights (Willard's mission to kill Kurtz is non-existent for the official record, 'it never happened,' as the general who briefs Willard points out)" (Žižek 2005). Such secret operations to kill those who over-bond with the military have a way of killing the unintended but also rendering the operatives dead, because why should there be the messy and traumatic contradiction of witnesses to a human-rights problem of military over-identification that is not said to have existed? A hunger for a simple, non-implicating story devours the truth, for a time, until the truth is regurgitated.

Slavoj Žižek's reflections on what the U.S. military does without ever admitting to it and on other GWOT transmedia can be very helpful in understanding the deeper traumatic layers of *Spec Ops: The Line* and its stressful impacts on the player. One of the impossible situations that Slavoj Žižek comes back to via many movies in a large collection of his essays *Living in the End Times* is that the perpetrator of trauma lives in neither world fully: he or she is no longer belonging at the site of traumatic impact any more, but unable to fully shift to "normality" in the post-GWOT experience either. In examples from several episodes of the long running counter-terrorism Fox series of nine seasons entitled *24* with agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) premiering not quite two months after 9/11, this grey area or limbo-land often arises. Žižek shrewdly spotlights the ethical and moral deadlock "of a subject aware that what he has done in order to survive has compromised him so much that there is now no way back to normality; given the obscenity of his actions he has forfeited the right to normal life. If he is still alive 'when all this is over,' he will not be able to avoid committing suicide; what he has done can in no way be re-integrated into the 'normal' coordinates of ethical decency" (Žižek 2011, 397). In the past for this tormentor, there is "absolutely no hope for him; his situation is a nightmare, and once the nightmare is over, his life will have become impossible." What is left then but suicide? Such a death is "not the only ethical thing he can do, but also the only way out of an existential deadlock in which his sole choice is between the bad (the present nightmare) and the worse (normality)" (Žižek 2011, 397). In perpetrating acts of terror, or in reaction to it using disproportionate cruelty and firepower against those merely suspected of terrorism, it is impossible to retain one's dignity. In fact, if we cross lines of abuse and then pose that we have held on to our humanity, we commit a further ethical/moral catastrophe. Jack Bauer is a way to read into United States Army's Delta Force Captain Martin Walker from *Spec Ops: The Line*. Both were

operating for what they felt was the greater good; both became aware of what damage they did in that pursuit; both are haunted by a ghost.

24's Counter Terrorism Unit's protagonist Jack Bauer, sensing he is dying after being exposed to radiation, confesses to a Muslim cleric he has directed or conducted torture of Muslim terror suspects (some of who were wrongly accused). But often in perpetrator trauma accounts, as with this series that would spin off three video games (*24: The Game*, *24: Mobile* and *24: Agent Down*), no absolution or calm comes after confession (Surnow and Cochran 2001–2010, 2014). Indeed, Žižek analyzes this meeting of perpetrator and symbolic victim with characteristic depth. “The cleric’s visit brings no inner peace,” Žižek accurately concludes, “all [Jack Bauer] can do is live with it, haunted by his past deeds to the end of his days. There is no simple solution of ‘I acted for the common good’ offered here, even less the Alan Dershowitz solution of legalizing torture” (Žižek 2011, 397). Similarly, when we see the aftermath of his phosphorous mortar-shell attack on Dubai and all the civilian dead in *Spec Ops: The Line* (Fig. 14.2), which was meant to stop the renegade “Damned 33rd” battalion, we (both the player and Walker) are haunted by Konrad’s visitant-like voice to us: “None of this would have happened if you had just stopped ...”



Fig. 14.2 Civilians dead and mission regretted. (Screenshot from trailer: Spec Ops: The Line)

(Davis and Coulon 2012). We are to blame: Walker (and we the players) try to shift the blame in our moves and speech, but the unburied, unhidden dead are still ours to face.

Curiously *Spec Ops: The Line* is the 10th game in the *Spec Ops* franchise, and over a decade after its release, no more have come. The game might be a critical success in how it exposes the horrors of war and makes players question what they do (in gaming terms, creating a “physically opposing” environment). But *Spec Ops: The Line* underperformed financially and has been announced as the last in the franchise. It does not matter to game corporations if *Spec Ops: The Line* made war the murkiest in recent war game memory and absorbed players by showing our avatar “deviating more and more from whom he thinks he is” (Howard 2014).

Managing Director Timo Ullman at Yager Development says there will be no further sequels to this one “and probably no more military shooters from Yager at all... . If you can’t compete with the big ones, the risk is too big. The market for ‘smart’ or ‘intellectual’ games is too niche. Elitist almost” (qtd. in Moser 2016). The unsettling fact that a game (which is one of the most discussed academically in the last decade) is not light-hearted enough about killing to be economically viable speaks volumes about gaming and about media on the Global War on Terror in general. Storytelling mediums that make people think clearly about the damage done in the name of American/Coalition/NATO values unsettle consumers too much. (Somehow the *Batman* movie franchise’s commentary on the GWOT, which are mediated by being highly allegorical, seem not to ever dim box office receipts.) But such moral quandaries in a game—actually being asked moral questions during the play—upsets people not only in the West. This final game in the *Spec Ops* series, for its showing of the city of Dubai in ruins, is at the time of writing still prohibited for sale in the United Arab Emirates.

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Juan Benito and Jaime Griesemer's *Six Days in Fallujah* (2022): Marines, Doors, & Furious Phantoms

Haunting in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and *Six Days in Fallujah* (Benito and Griesemer 2022), hereafter *SDIF*, is abetted in its central dread by a Gothic-like focus on fear of the human “monsters” or the Other behind a door, hidden in a wall, crouched in a cellar and ready to shoot through floorboards, or in an attic and looking down at the Western soldier coming into the building or residence from Dubai to Baghdad. What is behind the door is the trope of countless scary movies, but also many Gothic tinged stories, the exemplar being “The Monkey’s Paw.” In this famed W. W. Jacobs’ tale from 1902 of the power of wanting too much and of colonial guilt-terror, which horror-master Jordan Peele would one day name his film production company after, a family with the cursed monkey’s paw evokes the old Greek warning to ever “Be careful what you wish for.” Passed to a mutual acquaintance by a vengeful Indian fakir, the magic primate paw lets anyone ask for wishes that will be met. When the couple who takes the paw asks for two wishes, they get their dreams at the expense of their son’s life. A last request from his mother to the paw brings the son back from the dead, whereupon he comes to the closed door of their home (Jacobs 2005). The idea of the thing rapping behind the door, pounding, shaking the doorknob to enter is the stock experience of the Gothic, and it resonates especially deeply in *Frankenstein* where shut doors (from the laboratory to the de Quincy cabin to the ship of the explorer Walton himself) stand to silently ask the central question: Who is behind that door, and what happens if we let it in?



Fig. 15.1 Breaking and clearing in the ultra-realistic firefight. (Screenshot from trailer: *Six Days in Fallujah*)

Six Days in Fallujah is the game (Fig. 15.1), as its developers say, that brings “war to your doorstep” (Staff 2021b). Developed by Highwire Games for its owners Victura with 2022 as its “initial release date,” this game’s creative team has the credibility and history of being directed by some of the co-inventors of the first *Destiny* and *Halo* video games, which brings both the precedents of older major war video games but major possible shifts for new ones. Victura claims *Six Days in Fallujah* was “conceived by a Marine who was badly wounded during the battle, and developed with help from more than 100 Marines, Soldiers, and Iraqi civilians, ... mixing documentary with gameplay to recreate true stories from the 2004 Second Battle for Fallujah” (Staff 2021c). As one of the former U.S. Marines who stormed Fallujah in “Operation Phantom-Fury” and advised on the video game notes, it is about mimicking the experience of entry and clearing in the Second Battle of Fallujah (a city that had been ISIS-controlled) door by door. The American name of this military operation begs the question: Who are the furious phantoms? Are the phantoms the Marines who move stealthily and want their vengeance against militants who have killed American and Coalition troops, or are they the mix of sectarian insurgents trying to hold Fallujah and furious at the Western invaders? The Marine interviewed notes that in this battle he had to look 360 degrees around, while checking to look down and look up because enemy firing could come from any of those angles. The game tries to imitate this intensity and vulnerability. What *Six Days in Fallujah* has most notably done, in my view, is removing the Uncanny Valley altogether. Hyper-realistic, based on photographs of Fallujah, with each play changing out the map to a new block, the

soldiers' gear is also meticulously like actual gear, the guns are not fully automatic as in many games, but semi-automatic as in the real life of the Fallujah-reclaiming Western soldiers. In other games, players spray, pray, play away with endless ammunition, while in actual combat soldiers aim and save precious ammunition. Before storming Fallujah in 2004, American and Coalition troops were told by commanders "that 70% of them would be killed or wounded during the next few days. They went in anyway. Then, after 70% of these men were actually killed or wounded, the rest regrouped and went in again" (Staff 2021a). For Western forces, this is a loss rate rarely experienced in the post-Vietnam War era. Designing a new strategy was obviously paramount and one of those concerned getting into buildings with minimal advance notice or tracing.

One of the creative designers of *SDIF* followed this frustration of the troops and insisted on building into the game more trauma. Victura studio then pushed the creativity to craft a game closer to real-life combat. In other games, soldiers frequently go through the front door, and the walls they shoot through are paper thin, for example. In *Six Days in Fallujah*, not only are the walls thick but soldiers prefer to make their own entrances by punching through a building rather than being shot at the expected entry point of the front door as is more like combat's reality. Victura even modeled the faces and bodies of the game's American soldiers from the actual U.S. marines who have consulted with the game designers. This edges the playing into a new form—mixing documentary instincts (however one-sided and pro-American military) with an interactive game, where we may take on some of the distress and guilt that the soldiers do when civilian passers-by are murdered. In their anthology study *Shooter*, editors Reid McCarter and Patrick Lindsey make a compelling case that most video games search for ways to make players feel potent (2015). Our first reaction might be that we can think of hundreds of games we have played that might seem to test that—from videogames of fishing in a pond to exploring outer reaches of space—and yet like a war video game those aforementioned still gift us some power over our environment, still let us catch the lunkers under the water's surface or spy aliens on a once-thought lifeless planet. However, Marc Smith rightly makes the case, agreeing with McCarter and Lindsey, that perhaps as common are those calming games are those make us feel *too* powerful. He makes a reasoned case that the following games create a titan complex in us as we play. Consider *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor*, or *Bioshock 2*, *Batman: Arkham Series*, *Resident Evil 4*, *Diablo III*, *Dead by Daylight*, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, *Prototype*, *Dragon Warriors*, and *Saints Row IV* (Smith 2020).

The task in *Six Days in Fallujah* is to clear houses and buildings of terrorists in Falluja and hold it: moving block by block, find and kill them one by one. Because of the controversial nature of the Second Battle of Falluja in November 2004, and the mass numbers of civilian dead and use of white phosphorus, as well as the loss of many soldiers in the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Marines' American soldiers, this game's development has been slowed and forgotten and then later found and revived like an injured soldier on the battlefield. The game's initial developer Peter Tamte, head of Atomic Games, admitted that even before the Second Battle of Falluja his company was "developing training tools for the U.S. Marine Corps, and they assigned us some U.S. soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines to help us out" (Tamte 2009a). Not long after the impetus for the game arrived from a U.S. Marine from Falluja who requested a game be made from that battle: "When they came back from Fallujah, they asked us to create a video game about their experiences there, and it seemed like the right thing to do. ... All of us are curious about what it would really be like to be in a war. I've been playing military shooters for ages, and ... when I'm playing the game, I know it's fake" (Tamte 2009b, 60).

Now with *SDIF*, Tamte and developers hoped players could "travel" there and be "experiencing the events as they really happened." This is the innovation many gamers hoped for, and so *Six Days in Fallujah* which was started in 2005 and scheduled for completion in the 2022 (with sequences of the game already viewable by myself at time of writing). But others were unconvinced, even livid at the thought. Especially in the United Kingdom, groups were protesting both a game that would show Arabs and Islamist fighters killed, generating more anti-Arab discrimination and violence in the West, along with more Arab civilians slain elsewhere in combat without much thought. Second, pro-Veteran lobbies protested, including the UK's Stop the War Coalition, citing that so many soldiers were injured or killed in Fallujah that it degraded their sacrifice. I believe this censoring instinct is unwise: for one, it increases interest in the forbidden art, which is the opposite from what these groups barring access want. For another, it prejudices and kills in the womb an art form even before it is born. Indeed, what *Six Days in Fallujah* attempted is more historical than what other games have (save for some World War II and Vietnam War games), in that the developers interviewed people at the scene of the traumatic atrocities—including Marines, other soldiers, and civilians—while consulting military historians and war officials. All of this raises the possibilities for what a game can do to reflect reality and the depth of historical research

that powered it—especially in a game which changes the portion of a neighborhood for each new play. One of the ironies is the actual American and Coalition veterans kept complaining they had outmoded maps during combat, but today's players will have updated ones of the neighborhoods fought in. Finally, the fake-factor is reduced with the possible result that some kind of trauma would result in the player and awareness of suffering, rather than the blithe running, hiding, and shooting of other battle games. It seems more conscientious to protest facile killings in unrealistic entertainment games rather than those games that actually echo combat. Easy killings, suggesting that it is fun to slay others and there is no physical or psychic repercussion, seems a much more ominous factor for a war video game once in the hands and minds of millions of players using Xbox, Playstation, and Microsoft platforms.

The political and war trauma of Fallujah seems a microcosm of the errors and terrors, failures and endless death of the Iraqi war. Within a year of the Coalition starting a war against Iraq (on March 20, 2003), Fallujah is taken over by early 2004 by Al Qaeda insurgents. Then Coalition forces of Iraqi, British, and American soldiers attack in early 2004 to remove or kill them. One former government Ba'athist official named Jasim Mohammed Saleh is given arms by the Coalition, with the city handed over to him to protect. Later, he is discovered as having had carried out atrocities against the Kurds in the Iran-Iraq war, and another Ba'ath Party General, Muhammed Latif, is picked by the United States to raise an army of 1100 soldiers, commonly denoted as the Fallujah Brigade, to hold Fallujah. By September of 2004, the Fallujah Brigade has already been fired upon by every insurgent group operating in Iraq, withering by its members (some simply deserting or selling their weapons), and it soon disbanded. The insurgent group then commanding the city—in numbers estimated from 3000 to 5000 full- and part-time fighters—is Al Qaeda. The terrorist group's Fallujah forces are led by the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of Fallujah's 300,000 civilians leave before the Coalition with 13,500 soldiers attack to "cleanse and hold" Fallujah in this Second Battle, and yet civilian dead are numbered by the International Red Cross at 800 people, and medical authorities of Iraq estimate up to 6000 civilians had been killed by the fighting. Sadly, within a few months after the Coalition leaving, insurgent attacks incrementally grow again in Fallujah, and roughly a year later, they operate in large numbers there (West 2005; O'Donnell 2006; Bellavia and Bruning 2008). The Third Battle of Fallujah will not be with Al-Qaeda

but with ISIS in Spring of 2014, and the city remained held by the enemy until the success of Special Operations units and the Army of Iraq in the Summer of 2016.

Knowing the depressing history of Fallujah's constant handovers helps us comprehend some of the desperation of this video game: what exactly is the Coalition fighting and dying for if Western forces will just have to give up the city later to another batch of Islamist enemies? It is important to note that 8 members of the Iraqi Army were killed in this Second Battle, along with 4 British soldiers and 95 American service personnel. The other function of this futile capture, loss, and recapture (and the constant pawning of American weapons to the enemy) is a sort of sympathy for the traumatized Western soldier. On the one hand, they may at times be a perpetrator of trauma: they may kill civilians, either by a beating, a bullet, a mortar, or by white phosphorus mortars controversially deployed during this battle. Moreover, such soldiers did volunteer to serve in the armed forces and could reasonably have expected to have to withstand harrowing combat. However, Western soldiers are also constantly traumatized by their own physical and psychic injuries, and the death around them, including the deaths of their comrades in arms, not reasonably expecting that they would be called back for repeated tours of duty. One American sergeant, Jason Kyle of Lima Company from 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, who consulted on the video game *Six Days in Fallujah* remembers holding up a sign wishing his little boy J.J. back home in America a happy birthday, and moments later Sergeant Kyle had to burst into a house and start shooting insurgents (Fig. 15.2). What he found when he kicked in the door, he told the developers of *Six Days in Fallujah*, was a family of four. Sgt. Kyle said to the father, "*Dude, why are you still here?*" (qtd. in Lilley and Moltrup 2021, min. 13).

This is the kind of pause for a soldier that can end up killing him or her. A reviewing duo for video games, the usually chatty and unfazed veterans Patrick Moltrup (SEAL Team Six member and former CIA operative) and Jason Lilley (a Marine raider and scout sniper), remember their own special operations in the Middle East and appear traumatized as they watch this game play out (Lilley and Moltrup 2021). Their silence, stares, and dropped open mouths suggest wounds that have not healed since their days of military service: they seem somewhere else during the *SDIF* combat. In Iraq itself, there was constant unease from late November to early December 2004 during this battle over which soldiers would survive



Fig. 15.2 Insurgent spotters outside the buildings and hidiers inside build combat stress in players. Who is tucked inside the walls, above the ceiling, or beneath in the basement, awaiting you with a machine gun? (Screenshot from trailer: *Six Days in Fallujah*)

taking back the contested city, and *Six Days in Fallujah* evokes this, but how does it create it more realistically than other video games?

An interesting technological dependence *Six Days in Fallujah* has, which increases its traumatic potential for re-experiencing the paralyzing incident in new and Gothicized ways, is on procedural modeling, an AI technique much like an architect would use for clients who wishes not to create new images manually. In other words, this video game has a randomizing generator for making new intact or broken windows, a generator for making doors, a generator for making brick walls, and a generator for making rooftops and courtyards and rooms and more. All this algorithmic generation of designs to fight through creates constant foreignness for the players as they grope in the darkness: nothing is precisely the same in game after game. If the urban battlefield is reshaped “each time the game is played, assembling entire buildings and city blocks procedurally,” then what safe places can the player learn to depend on? “Marines told us they never knew what was waiting behind the next door,” the game’s creation executive Jaime Griesemer reports, “But, in video games, we play the same maps over and over again. Just knowing the layout of a building in advance

makes playing a combat encounter in a video game very different than actual combat” (qtd. in Forum Manager 2021). Adding to this is a shadow of mortality, as analyzed by one of the block-clearing sergeants from the actual battle (Adam Banotai) who advised on *Six Days in Fallujah*: “Memorizing maps is fake. It’s that simple. Clearing an unfamiliar building or neighborhood is terrifying. You have no idea what’s about to happen, and this is one of the reasons we experienced such high casualties” (qtd. in Forum Manager 2021). Crafting a game that is not static again brings a reality that can be more flashback-triggering: “players never know what to expect. While mission objectives and events are consistent with the true stories, every scenario becomes a unique experience each time players restart” (qtd. in Forum Manager 2021). What remains is the vision of civilians getting in the way, or being far inside a nearly lightless building that all the soldiers thought was evacuated, but then suddenly in the cross-hairs of their weapons with just a moment’s decision to fire upon them or to wave them away.

A trauma and literature critic as knowledgeable as Alan Gibbs has remarkable insight to share on traumatic soldier-memoirs. Gibbs rightly maintains that soldiers in their memoirs (Kayla Williams’ *Love My Rifle More than You* as well as Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead*) press their own suffering upon us, using “rhetorical tropes ... [that] overturn the political realities underlying destructive American incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq” (2014, 168). This is valid, and yet when we go a leap beyond this non-interactive memoir media analyzed and take the player controls in a video game and become this soldier in a simulation, we are joining the quest to liberate the city from Al Qaeda, and that means killing people with a milli-second decision span. That sometimes leads to shooting comrades in friendly fire and civilians in cross-fire confusion. What happens here—the adventure to live, the game to play, the destination to arrive at—increases the identification with the soldier characters exponentially from fiction, film, or nonfiction. In the end, we are holding the control that fires the bullets, launches the grenades, or shoots the missiles. In the gaming room, sits the killer: so far from Iraq, and yet close to it. This could result for any critic what happens in the theatre of combat, as Gibbs might call it: a “dereliction of analytical duty” (2014, 168) or what Richard Crownshaw names that “which seems missing from this literary reckoning with perpetration: ... the idea of the American as perpetrator” (2011, 76). With the game, we are pushed to an almost impossible round of evaluation—judging the Western powers, judging the character in the heat of

combat, and judging ourselves. We have paid for the game: we wish to finish the game—we must see it through and know what happens and how we feel at its ending. This could explain why players return to a traumatic game though it could bring them blame, shame, and guilt.

In *Six Days in Fallujah*, as mentioned, it is doors, windows, cellars, attics, and other loci of entry and hiding from any Gothic novel that hold the possibility for secrets, insurgents, weapons and ammunition caches, attacks, and death itself. One U.S. Marine veteran of Fallujah and advisor to *SDIF*, Mike Ergo, describes the central concept of terror within such spaces well: “It’s not conventional warfare where you have a force on one side and the opposing force on the other in a straight line. The enemy’s all around... . And you have to have your Marine squad facing 360 degrees: ... front, back, left, and right--and up and down as well. Bringing those elements into the game, and having insurgents hide in so many more spaces, creates enormous challenges” for the players (qtd. in Tamte 2009a, minute 0.28). The creative director for Atomic Games Juan Benito who joined the effort for this video game noted that “In previous games the environment is more of a façade than any real part of the play experience... . [But this one] is a completely destructible environment: every wall has thickness; all the buildings have structural supports. We have advanced physics systems in the game itself and that make it difficult because we can’t do the cheats and shortcuts that we’ve done in the past” (qtd. in Tamte 2009a). Another contributor to its development, Atomic Games President Peter Tamte, complicates Benito’s description by noting that the environment may permit more realistic game play but it has a sinister purpose: to better eliminate you. He noted that “Marines typically don’t enter through the front door because that’s where the enemy orients his fire. Instead, they’ll make their own entrance. So we built an engine in which players can blow holes in any wall or collapse any building: it allows you the flexibility to move anywhere within the environment and use the same tactics the marines were using” (qtd. in Tamte 2009a). Playing even 30 minutes of the game is deeply confusing for as your squad tries to move a few meters it is shot at from endless vantage points in buildings and one can barely see where the shots are discharging from. They seem to be coming from holes in the walls. There are enemy snipers seemingly hiding above and beside, if not in the spider holes beneath you. It is a game to die in.

Enough of this play in *Six Days in Fallujah* and a kind of panic ensues and even an impulse to use your M16 to scattershot or kill whatever moves. Doors, as Gothic critics often note, represent “the threshold ...

[that] liminal space between good and evil” and how “evil crosses the border,” and houses often stand in Gothic interpretations as “the breeding ground for the evil” (Eismann 2015). Doors open to traps, secrets, tricks, mystery, sins, new realizations along with power, and sudden death. The player controls that journey deeper into chaos and threats and growing brutality through intentionally opening or accidentally falling through doors. They key that *Six Days in Fallujah* follows that many first-person shooter games do not is that it leaves us with the victim we have killed: they fall over next to us, whether terrorist or innocent bystander. They do not disappear. And in that moment where the player kills not a terrorist but a civilian family, we create what Tobi Smethurst calls “an empathic link to the perpetrator [made] in a way that films or novels cannot” (2015, 143).

A number of my students each term are soldiers from the GWOT, some with physical injuries (especially harm done from improvised explosive devices) and they are on physical and mental edge when discussing these games. They have service animals they bring to class to help with the tension—big bushy German Shepherds, seemingly bored and permanently placid, which is a calming presence required for some traumatized combat soldiers. We sometimes do not consider soldiers playing these war video games before. Often when we think of typical gamers, it’s the everyday person, untrained in combat or other military logistics. However, what I have found is that an overwhelming number of former U.S. Marines and U.S. Army soldiers (describing themselves as “Bullet Sponges”) that I have taught were attracted to the work of counter-terrorism by playing war video games when they were younger. Indeed, it is troubling and profound when I watch soldiers (some of whom are my students and some not) review a game (even a promotion of it) and I can see from their sweating and shaking that they are having flashbacks. During COVID-19 when active troops could not train together in the close quarters inside a tank, Staff Sergeant Tommy Huynh of the U.S. Army’s 1st Cavalry encouraged them to go online for tank games: “We are able use the game as a teaching tool for each crew member, For example, [drivers can train on maneuver formations and change formation drills. For young Soldiers it helps them to just understand the basics of their job... . We get a lot of questions and feedback. I’m not sure if it is because of the disturbed nature of it or if it is because they are seeing things from a different perspective, but my Soldiers are speaking up and sharing their thoughts” (qtd. in Kuhn 2020). Captain Huynh’s soldiers are trained for readiness to face the unrepresentable, and the students of mine past and present are the ones

already traumatized. My students, as the *SDIF*-maker Victura points out, are a few of the “three million people 41 countries sent to fight a war in Iraq that was controversial even before it started” (Staff 2021c). They are the men and women who were given “the most important permission of all: the freedom to use lethal weapons” (Trombetta 2010, 139) They start out tough enough about the latest war game, joking, nonchalant, jaded. The same attitude is seen in the aforementioned veterans on YouTube who reviewed game play of *Six Days in Fallujah*, Special Operations soldier Patrick Moltrup and Marine Raider and Scout Sniper Jason Lilley (Lilley and Moltrup 2021). As they play a portion of the video game, however, they get more intense, quiet. Something quickens in them as they watch. Fear of death? Fear of living with what they have seen and done? Fear of being haunted by those they have killed? What are they imagining? And what of the innocents who crossed their path and hoped not to die? Who remembers their trauma?

When the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) protested *Six Days in Fallujah*, even before the game was finished in development, it asked game storefronts including Microsoft, Sony, and Valve “not to host or distribute what it calls an ‘Arab murder simulator’” (Watts 2021). But could CAIR be missing the point of gazing into the potent reflection of the GWOT that this game is? CAIR is backed by some veterans. U.S. Marine Dakota Myer, for example, who saved lives of personnel during a 2009 Afghanistan military operation could see CAIR’s argument as a reasonable objection. Myer (who President Obama awarded a Medal of Honor for his bravery) vented his frustration: “War has now been romanticized... . I hear people say I just want to go kick in doors and shoot people in the face. Well, you’ve probably never done it then. We’ve got kids playing video games of the stuff that keeps me awake at night. And it’s like, at what point do we start humanizing these things” (qtd. in Makuch 2019). “Suffering,” Myer laments, “has become normal for people. It’s become entertainment” (qtd. in Makuch 2019). Nonetheless, remembering conflict is not automatically glamorizing violence. A game that is realistically violent should not be disowned before release, but offered to gamers and examined for its darker truths, for reflection on the victimhood these past battles caused. Former U.S. Marine sergeant Eddie Garcia, who was injured at the Battle of Fallujah where the Red Cross noted that 800 civilians died, offered his *Six Days in Fallujah* concept in 2005. He made a case that is difficult to refute: “War is filled with uncertainty and tough choices that can’t be understood by watching someone

on a TV or movie screen make these choices for you. Video games can help all of us understand real-world events in ways other media can't" (qtd. in Makuch 2021).

One reason groups on social media and television news protested this game's development is that here art is not an escape from war's reality, but a way to get deeper into the actual experience. Here, art is painful and full of unprocessed memory. From Chap. 1 forward, I have evaluated (and held a reasonable skepticism toward) Cathy Caruth's concept that trauma transmits from storytellers to readers/viewers through all those storytelling devices modelled on PTSD symptoms, from repetition, flashbacks, searches for missing material, intrusive memories, disorientation, emotional dysregulation (or many moods within a short passage), manic or frantic use of language, and fragmenting the narrative or continually breaking the temporal flow of an account. I have also encouraged readers to consider, as Caruth hints at, that the trauma victim and the trauma perpetrator both have memory gaps, and those gaps are in the media itself, and that lacunae is felt by the reader as not remembering all of the trauma. These might be cases where a character becomes both the victimizer and a victim—shooting someone and then being shot at, torturing someone and then being tortured, deploying bombs and being bombed, not being willing or able to stop a rape by others in Iraq and then being accused in court of the rape Stateside. However, influenced by Alan Gibbs' questioning perceptions in his *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, I would like to challenge more of Caruthian orthodoxy on trauma as well. Gibbs has a reflection that gives trauma interpreters needed pause: "Mainstream trauma theory professes abhorrence of the perpetrator, but this might also be used covertly to deny perpetrator status. Trauma theory is thus implicated in post-9/11 events, enabling the reconfiguration of the traumatized U.S. body politic as absolute victim, since perpetrators are excluded from suffering trauma" (2014, 243). Gibbs has cautioned that "the trauma genre may itself be characterized as exhibiting the ubiquitous trauma symptom of repetition. It is there in the intertextual transmission of tropes from trauma text to trauma text, and writer's aping of earlier works, in critics' unquestioning repetition of theoretical tenets, and in the vicious circle of mutually reinforcing criticism and narratives" (2014, 243). If the killer suffers trauma too, what is the interpreter of such texts supposed to feel?

How much more emotion and empathy might be felt if storytelling has sound and light (as a film does), or unpredictable, plot-creating

interaction and vulnerable avatars (as games do)? The motion sensor capture for the actors in games is getting better and better. Games academician Sean Travers noted to me that, based on my description, the Uncanny Valley sensation (that robotics professor Masahiro Mori's outlined in his trailblazing essay from 1970) may almost be gone in *Six Days in Fallujah*. That might be in part because this game's agents are modeled on actual veterans' physiologies and voices so faithfully that we see almost no gap between the real and the AI. "Because of the level of interactivity unique to the game form," Travers argues, "the medium can more effectively encourage its audiences to identify and empathize with protagonists, and more directly experience the violent acts perpetrated by the controllable protagonist" (2022). This supplemented level of interactivity over other storytelling, especially within "moral choice games," leads to replayability that often positions "the players as the villains of the narratives" (2022). A phenomenon often observed (Lange 2014; Joyce 2016; Travers 2022) is that later plays of the same game, when one's full concentration level on all the newness of the game has abated, produces a deviously destructive narrational curiosity, and an opting for some evil choices. Travers elegantly defends her novel thesis that within "players' more detached replays of games, in-game decisions are not the result of their moral convictions but, as with representations of the postmodern psychopath found in more traditional media, experimenting with narrative alternatives" (2022). Travers links her meditation on this tendency of us to make games crueler to Warner Independent's 2007 *Funny Games* (dir. Michael Haneke) but concentrates most fully on GameMaker Studio's 2015 *Undertale* (dir. Toby Fox). Applying Travers' concept, I see the same increased drive to destroy (and experiment out of sheer boredom and need for more sordid action to feel something as a serial killer may do) manifests after multiple playing of Rockstar Game's 2013 *Grand Theft Auto V*. Here, players may have realistic sex with prostitutes—no more car doors pulled open to cover fellatio as with previous *Grand Theft Auto* iterations (Cook 2014). The new toxic kink is that players can shirk paying the prostitute on a replay. Players too committed to the main game action to avoid payment for sex acts during their first play, now may toy at their leisure and balk at handing over cash, and then cut their chosen prostitute with a hatchet and leave her bleeding to death on the asphalt. This butchery does not stand in for the other darkness, though: a mission called "By the Book" remains to be played where the *Grand Theft Auto V* player must commit torture before progressing—and that menu includes choices of waterboarding, shocking,

tooth pulling, or shooting someone in the knee. Perhaps the escalating levels of misogyny and senseless violence within this franchise are what understandably explains many parents' outrage and some victim-advocacy groups' opposition to action video games in general. Whatever the case, this level of violence does not deter enough of the players. The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise remains one of Britain's best-selling exports, and 2021 saw its parent company end the year with \$3.4 billion in net revenue, growing over 9 percent during COVID-19 (Take-Two Interactive Software 2021). *Grand Theft Auto V* itself was the second best-selling game of all time with more than 165 million units shipped (Take-Two Interactive Software 2021). Torture and death have been good to its maker Rockstar Games.

Still, the anger against and the shut-downs of *Six Days in Fallujah* in its long journey to reach gamers is an unfair alignment with the ilk of *Grand Theft Auto*. For one, *SDIF* has a good chance of the player being injured or killed or sacrificing himself or herself for something larger including for the life of his or her squad. Further, it is not the gratuitous violence of stealing cars and other criminal passions, but a re-creation of taking a city building by building from the insurgents who terrorized it. Last, I sense that re-playability of this game will not encourage a devilish urge to punish and destroy, transforming us into the mischievous villain. A key preventer of that phenomenon of growing bored and creating carnage to distract is the game's mapping innovation that with every new play comes new buildings and streets, along with who may be waiting for us in those residences. A person or persons unknown with firearms aims at your head and at your heart.

Finally, in its largest healing dimension, *SDIF* which is looking so much like the Second Battle of Fallujah (where designers have pored over data from the scene, interviewing 26 civilians who were there along with dozens of soldiers, and even using their faces as models), could have a therapeutic value for the traumatized, as well. That promise in therapeutic-possibility was earlier raised by a military therapy game, *Virtual Iraq*. In 2004, University of Southern California clinical psychologist Dr. Albert Rizzo and programmer Jarrell Pair (who helped program the prototype game *Virtual Vietnam* in 1975) developed *Virtual Iraq* to assist returning veterans from the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. These veterans were so stricken by their military memories that they avoided large crowds, refused to drive, panicked at unexpected sounds, and constantly needed medicine to help them sleep, preferring to mostly

commune with infantry soldiers once back in America. There hallucinations of the war plagued them and destroyed their intimate relationships. Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, has noted in despair that “most PTSD therapies that we’ve seen don’t seem to be working” (qtd. in Halpern 2008). However, with a game like *Six Days in Fallujah*—as well as a psychologist to prompt a suffering veteran and guide them through their emotional memories in “a very safe and supportive fashion” as has been done with *Virtual Iraq* (Rizzo 2008)—we may have veterans relive those fears but control the action of the screen as well. If we can make them more accustomed to the shapes of the threats, and take away some of the unknowns of the monster that is terror, we possibly may remove some of the debilitating intrusive thoughts and resulting panic that come to many. One prominent Game Blogger on YouTube asked about *Six Days in Fallujah*, Will we be playing “the most controversial first person shooter ever”? (Allen 2022). I believe so, because its level of realism surpasses what I have played in other games so far. As this book goes to print, London’s Imperial War Museum opens an exhibition called “War Games” with a special feature on *SDIF*, challenging entrenched perceptions of what experiences video games give us of wars and conflicts. Might this game be, as a gaming critic writes, “grotesque, jingoistic, imperial apologia” (Knava 2021)? In other words, as another video game scholar muses, is this all like playing with history via “interactive propaganda”? (Male 2022). So far, I would say, No: a promising chance at processing the past for victims and perpetrators is here.

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PART VI

Coda



Debriefing

This book exists to provide summaries of the key conflicts in Global War on Terror works, as well as commentary on their structures, characters, historical bases, verisimilitude, and ways of remembering. These works form a canon for reading and discussing the Gothic imagination meeting the War on Terror or a course media-list for a high school or university class on how American art imagines its contemporary wartime pain, fatalities, grief, strange hauntings, and PTSD. What lies beneath our experiencing these stories in four forms (novels, comics, films, and video games) are the ways these works unconsciously interrogate one another. What they inherit from these wars is a traumatic bonding of themes.

This study of how from 2002 to 2022 American artists interpreted and reflected the Global War on Terror raises unsettling questions. What if the angst and self-contempt, the guilt and the sorrow, the depression and futile revenge fantasies inhabiting all the storytelling are themselves symptoms of stress, reactions of ours to war, signs of American culture's PTSD to our disproportionate violence, invasions, and occupations following the 9/11 attack? An agonized art can be a symptom of a country's collective PTSD much in the way that within toy therapy traumatized children may construct a narrative of violation, ruin, and self-blame through the action figures they give voice to and the surroundings they manipulate. Yet if all this investigated storytelling media is one more marker of American culture's PTSD, it is also the most creative and open path to asking questions

about what we can do with our disorder. Storytelling is the way to for the largest number of people to encounter the overwhelming and contend with the intrusive in the most vivid ways.

My volume *9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City's Terrorism Novels* shadowed and interrogated ghost sightings by civilians in New Yorkers' otherwise realistic novels about the Twin Towers' destruction (Olson 2021). Now *Gothic War on Terror* has a larger agenda. It tracks and questions the engagement of law enforcement, the military, and intelligence agencies with the paranormal and the monstrous inside American novels, comics, films, and video games, asking what the weird meetings mean. My finding is that the Gothic presence in this storytelling media has shifting its meanings, but that it always opens some dark rooms of memory and speaks in some language of traumatic symbols, with a present trauma revealing something of an earlier one. The Gothic strain (in mode, themes, personalities, conflicts, and allusions) spreading throughout Global War on Terror storytelling locates the missing. It finds the devastating experiences that both victims endure and perpetrators enact, translating into Gothic figures and utterances and allusions those moments where both parties often black out, both reporting later that they felt like they had left their bodies and were no longer at the scene. However, it is tragically clear by their wounds that they had not left the scene.

One hundred years ago from my writing this conclusion came a story from Tokyo-born Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who would die by his own hand at age 35 in 1927. Within his story "In a Bamboo Grove," a young Samurai is killed in a forest near the old Japanese capital of Kyoto, and because of too many contradictory accounts (from passers-by, a police officer, a relative, a bandit, his wife, and the spirit of the samurai himself), it remains unclear who killed him and why. Few stories have cast such a fascination over my mind: the problem to such an investigator of a mysterious death is that the scene gives *too much* information. Like this story from 1922, all the GWOT media respect the concept that the more witnesses we hear from, the more the truth can be hidden. I have wandered Japanese woods on two separate visits, including its (believably) haunted Suicide Forest (Fig. 16.1), Aokigahara (that sea of trees at the foot of Mount Fuji), and this realization came back to me then. The thorn in my heart is this: there is gnawing desire to know conclusively what happened in a killing and all that motivated it. But that hunger collides with the uncertainties fueled by participants' guilt and shame and the fragility of witnesses' testimonies and memory. Akutagawa's story would

Fig. 16.1 Author entering the Suicide Forest (Aokigahara), Japan. (Photo: By Author)



cinematically be immortalized in Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* which won an honorary Oscar in 1952, just seven years following Americans and Japanese killing each other on the grandest scale of our two histories. Indeed, the film was released in August 1950, five years to the month of the American Air Force's atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, ironically just across a narrow water from the holy island I pilgrimage to where no one may be born and no one may die, Itsukushima (Fig. 16.2). Less than half a decade after Japan's unconditional surrender by its Emperor, reversing that country's military vow to fight the invaders to their last citizen's breath, Japan would be movie-making in ways that would re-shape art around the world. In *Rashomon*, there are multiple perspectives of a warrior's death, and even his spirit is unforgettably invoked through an otherworldly voiced possessed female medium to tell



Fig. 16.2 Author standing on Itsukushima, the holy Shinto island across the water from Hiroshima, where it was once forbidden to be born or to die. (Photo: By Author)

the court his version of how he died. That is one of the key mysteries *Gothic War on Terror* explores, as well. Multiple witnesses to the same event have multiple and clashing versions of it, based on their position or perspective, observational abilities and memory. What might they have to gain by telling a particular version or lying that they were not in the place they were not supposed to be? The famed “Rashomon Effect” is supported by all the GWOT works interrogated here, as well. But there is one more layer offered: memory has been traumatized, and so its participation in telling the account may be incomplete, disrupted, and non-linear. Still, the Gothic opens a trapdoor to that traumatic memory, however dark it may be below. Often through the victims’ dreams and visions and invasive memories, we find Gothic’s beasts, doppelgängers, miscreations, ghouls, and phantoms thrusting forth. We can meet in these figures some inklings of meanings and memories—and the motives, means, and opportunities for the killings—that the traumatized victim and perpetrator may not be otherwise able to express.

Rather than see the Gothic attendance within the GWOT creative works as an entertainment or a distracting intrusion, then, I see it as the necessary

dark angel, the needed genius to ask how we know something, and to what it compares. The Gothic is the provident spirit that queries “What if?” and “How was your experience like something else that scares you that you *can* talk about?” and “Who is the victim to you?” The rapid Gothic pulse does not make a war story any less serious or agonizing, but more accessible and more effective, communicating with us not through logic but through the undebatable power of a dream just before waking, no matter how ambiguous its forest of symbols may be. It is true that Death is the steady companion throughout this book: every protagonist or avatar by end of the work or game has killed or seen people killed. Many of these lead characters realize that they did not act fast enough or with enough intelligence to stop a tragedy. Nonetheless, besides the dependable but quiet company of Death itself, it is the Gothic that may be a War story’s greatest friend for handling the unfinished psychological business.

The Gothic incidents in these works keep indicating to us what the divided nine-year-old Cole Sear confessed in M. Night Shyamalan’s masterful *The Sixth Sense*, “I see dead people. Walking around like regular people. They don’t see each other” (1999). And like naïve Dr. Malcolm Crowe seemingly so alive as he looks at the boy, we wonder (in our case, as we read the novels and comics, play the video games, or watch the films, all unaware of our own budding Gothic existence, how we are slowly becoming future ghosts): “How often do you see them?” The little boy Cole who has kept the big secret the whole movie long shares the three truest words for oblivious Crowe: “All the time.” To that, the phantom psychologist’s reply: “To make them go away ... Just listen to them” (Shyamalan 1999). To so many ghosts in this volume, we have listened. They are in us now, and they will not slide away.

My last words in the volume are a request of myself and others. It would be a grotesque subtext on the investigating of Gothic War on Terror storytelling media, if we do not dedicate whole future volumes to authors who concentrate on people beyond those at the World Trade Center on 9/11, or beyond those serving as Western law enforcement and intelligence agencies, Coalition/NATO/and American troops, and their in-country support in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is past time for deeper, longer inquiries from scholars to explore great GWOT storytelling works from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and bordering countries who have richness beyond imagining. They have waiting for us with their own ghosts, monsters, and Gothic “Nightmare Life-in-Death.” I wish to recommend:

- Jamil Jan Kochai (born Peshawar, Pakistan, in a camp for Afghan refugees, 1992) for his *99 Nights in Logar* (2019) and *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories* (2022)
- Hassan Blasim (born Baghdad, Iraq, 1973) for his *The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq* (2014)
- Nadeem Aslam (born Gujranwala, Pakistan, 1966) for his *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013)
- Ahmed Saadawi (born Baghdad, Iraq, 1973) for his *Indeed He Dreams or Plays or Dies* (2008) and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013)
- Kamila Shamsie (born Karachi, Pakistan, 1973) for her *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *Home Fire* (2017)

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CLOSER TO *CARTHAGE*: AN INTERVIEW
WITH JOYCE CAROL OATES (CONDUCTED 15
JULY 2022 AND ORIGINAL TO THIS VOLUME)

Launching her first novel *With Shuddering Fall* in 1964 from Vanguard Press, Joyce Carol Oates has become one of the most significant novelists in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ever haunted by “more stories to tell.” In an interview I conducted with the author for *Weird Tales* magazine (2013) she shared, “I don’t think that a writer—perhaps any artist—can create anything without being ‘haunted’ in some way. You must find yourself thinking obsessively about—something ... I don’t believe the process can be willed; it must be natural. And it is all very mysterious.”

Given her range and her powers to re-invent and to conjure places, moods, people, and times, she has extended boundaries in the narrative realms of realism, the Gothic, urban decay histories, fantasy, horror, pulp mystery, crime, the romance, the time travel narrative, the family chronicle, the psychological suspense novel, and the war meditation including *Carthage*. Like many readers, my year-in-reading would feel empty without reaching for at least one new novel of hers along with a story collection. They stand as the indispensable works in our libraries. Her understanding of hope and evocation of fear in all its layers suture her oeuvre to the canon of world literature. Many, including former President Barack Obama, who awarded her the National Humanities Medal in March 2010, may scarcely imagine the terrain of fiction without her.

Having written over sixty novels since her debut, her recent novels include *Babysitter* and *Butcher*.

* * *

Author: You and I like to watch and share about films with each other. Are there some documentaries or dramas from 2001 forward that have stayed with you on the War on Terror? They may not influence your writing or be alluded to in your fiction, but maybe something inside them was haunting or revelatory?

Joyce Carol Oates (JCO): I am sure that I've seen something valuable over the years, but would need to take time to research this; the most helpful of books is Mark Danner's *Spiral: Trapped in the Forever War* (Simon & Schuster, 2016). Mark is a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*. (I am a great admirer of Ken Burns & Lynn Novick's documentary work, including *The Vietnam War* [writer, Geoffrey C. Ward; production, Florentine Films/WETA/NEH, 2017].)

Author: Did some memories (images, reactions, truths) from the "Living Room War" come back to you when you researched and wrote *Carthage*, or re-emerge now with our volunteer forces in the War on Terror from 2001 forward? Did it seem to you that the War on Terror was just as corrupt, mismanaged, doomed, dishonest, uncertain in its mission but certain in its killing and as morally destructive as the Vietnam War? Many differences occur, I realize (draftee forces vs. volunteer service members, rampant drug use then among forces vs. constant drug testing now among soldiers, freely roaming press then vs. embedded reporters now). But perhaps many similarities exist?

JCO: Yes, like many of us alarmed and distressed Americans, I have been following the bitterly ironic "progress" of the War on Terror from the start. But I rarely insert actual politics into a novel—it would be like turning on a bright, glaring, crass overhead light in a room more subtly lighted by lamps or even candlelight. Raw, new news is a kind of shout—it captures our attention at once, but only fleetingly. As we no longer care about the breaking news of a few years ago, so we are impatient to spend much time on the ephemeral, like slang, in a work of fiction. What is lasting, even universal, is the kind of despairing, self-lacerating yearning/passion Cressida feels for a young man whom in fact she scarcely knows: the phenomenon of being "in love" as a kind of madness, leading to destruction of one's self and others.

Author: Is the great lesson of history for Americans, as reflected in *Carthage*, that we never learn from history?

JCO: It isn't that "we" never learn from history, but that there is no "we" involved—individuals aligned with billion-dollar corporations really lead the country, guiding its foreign policies and pushing us into wars for reasons of capitalist profit. This may be a simplistic explanation—but—it is probably unlikely that we would have so many wars if businesses were not making enormous profits from them. (I remember reading how much money the manufacturers of uniforms, braid, buttons, boots, etc., made out of the Civil War—it was amazing!) "We" are usually told very abstract things, issues having to do with "democracy"—"freedom"—while the more knowledgeable, or the more cynical, are playing a kind of game, always edging forward, pushing their agenda, for a profit. Gun manufacturers, for instance, spur the national fetish for guns and "self-protection"—but the real motive is mercenary, and it is very naive to think otherwise. If gun manufacturing were a non-profit activity, the fetishizing of guns would cease at once.

Overall, in writing novel-length fiction, I am entranced by a rising, all-encompassing action—as in a tragedy of Shakespeare—in which persons have roles and discover themselves in the roles. I am not so interested in a fixed point of view, though in a novella or short story, a more restricted point of view can work dramatically.

Author: Many writers choose invented place names in their novels, never tell us the years when the action happens, and stuff the books with other ambiguities that de-center us, making it seem like "Anywhere, USA." But yours is a real place that we may have driven through. What pulled the town Carthage and other real places like the Nautauga State Forest Preserve and Dannemora/ Clinton Correctional Facility into becoming your novel's main settings? (Granted, this tendency to use actual places does not always continue once the narrative leaves New York, as with the fictional name for the Florida prison, Orion.)

JCO: *Carthage* is very much an upstate New York novel, though the actual Carthage is not the "fictitious" Carthage, if that makes sense. Obviously the title was chosen for the poetic sound of the name, the suggestion of "carnage," and for the historical resonance. However, it is not an unusual name in upstate New York where we find "Ithaca," "Troy," "Rome," "Syracuse," "Cicero" ... and many more. The setting of Dannemora/Clinton needs to be specific, but I have rendered the fairly ordinary town in a somewhat elevated light. Also: "Cressida" is a beautiful

classical name—but “Cressida” of “Troilus and Cressida” came to a tragic end.

Author: Although your novel dares itself and is highly original, it is also, like all books that mean something to us, in conversation with earlier novels that haunt readers. I wondered if Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*—its characters, conflicts, and style, as well as its structure, confessions, and emotions—engaged with you during researching and writing yours? Is *Crime and Punishment*’s troubled couple Raskolnikov and Sofia the ideal one to evoke or conjure here in *Carthage*?

JCO: Yes, I had Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* at the back of my mind while creating my characters in *Carthage*. I believe, like Dostoyevsky, in something like the humbling and breaking, the near-annihilation of the individual, preparatory to a reinvention of the self, a resurgence of energy. Also, the “humbling” of the self—that is a very real phenomenon.

Author: Reader perception is highly suggestible by point of view, and in *Carthage*’s Prologue, you make balletic shifts in point of view that are affecting us. Narratologists would be keen to study the influence on us over how the missing university student Cressida expresses herself in first person from paragraphs one through six of the Prologue, then smoothly switches to second person perspective in paragraph seven and then effortlessly moves into third person narration from paragraph eight to Prologue’s end. What are some advantages you see in shifting the point of view—and what light they choose to let through—within the same character?

I wonder what is the storytelling risk versus benefit in suggesting to readers that Cressida is alive (or at least that her ghost is “alive”) by having Cressida voice the Prologue? Doesn’t this lessen both suspense and surprise? Was there temptation at some early point of composing to keep her “decomposing” till your later section Part II: Exile, which you decided against? Perhaps the book is imitating how memory works? There are people we have lost who still slide into our minds all day as if alive.

JCO: I don’t think that the narrative “is” the perspective of characters but rather exists apart from individuals; that is, there is a “story” unfolding, which might be observed in fragments by several people. But the story is not the story of a single character—as in most of Henry James’s very constricted fiction, which a character’s narrow perspective is the point.) I am not so interested in going deeply into a character in that way—so deep inside a perspective, we scarcely know what is happening

around him or her, so that the drama is within the self. That is, the narrative excitement of a Henry James fiction is the discovery, usually by an innocent individual, that others have had relationships, usually illicit in nature, behind his/her back; but for me, the intention of the novel is to dramatize an action, which is comprised of a series of actions, observed by individual characters. That is why, for some writers, settings are so important—indeed, settings are “characters” in fiction. There is a quasi-surreal “spirit of place” which I am fascinated by, in the way that landscape painters are fascinated by their subjects.

(I’ve recently written an essay on the paintings of the American landscape artist Wolf Kahn, for whom New England was a shimmering field of light and extraordinary colors. I wonder if visual artists are hypnotized by their subjects, which are visual and spiritual, in the way that writers are fascinated by their subject, which is the interiority of the self and its struggle to connect with others.) [Ed. note: Joyce Carol Oates’ “Remembering Wolf Kahn” is viewable at her online *Writer’s Journal*: <https://joycecarolootes.substack.com/p/remembering-wolf-kahn>.]

Author: We can always try to bury the past or force it to secrecy. I can remember a passage from your *Uncensored* musing over Nathaniel Hawthorne burning “Sophia’s maiden letters” to himself, “with no sign of regret, remorse, or loss” (Ecco, 2005, 359). But then the past finds its way back to us anyhow. Does this novel’s characters concede that our memories defeat and control us and that we stay their numb slaves, and traumatic memories our master, no matter how we tried to burn them away?

JCO: Yes, the gravitational pull of the novel is that what is “unconscious” becomes “conscious.” It’s like an undertow—every page of the novel expresses this.

Author: Were there earlier writings of trauma (fictional or non-fictional) that strongly influence you or inspire you to go so deep into a fractured mind (and I mean literally a skull-fracture, as that is one of Corporal Brent Kincaid’s injuries)?

JCO: This is a good question! I don’t know the chronology, but I do recall reading Thom Jones with much admiration—(I miss Thom Jones! he left us far too soon.) The early stories of Hemingway are all about struggle of one kind or another—though characters do not suffer from brain damage per se.

Author: To close our interview, may we discuss the finely weird scene of *Carthage* when Haley Swain rescues mute, ditch-fallen Cressie in her arms at Nautauga? Wounded and delirious Cressie hears Haley talking (even

shouting “vehemently” in a one-sided conversation of fourteen lines) to someone as she lifts Cressie up: “Like hell I’m gonna deliver this girl to the hands of the enemy! No fuckin way!” (305). That unnamed listener during the carry is never shown or heard: “The other woman, whom she was never to see, made no reply but deferred to her companion who was leaning over Cressida now, grunting as she wrapped shivering Cressida in her arms” (304).

Is this simply Haley talking to herself loudly (which we never hear elsewhere in the novel)? Or does she have a silent sharer that is the ghost of her dead sister Sabbath McSwain (of whom Cressie becomes a doppelgänger)? Or was there actually some undescribed third woman traveler at the scene that day—and whatever became of her? She’s never mentioned again and does not seem to get out of the wilderness and into the truck of Haley McSwain, but such is perhaps suitable in this captivating novel where women sometimes vanish?

JCO: Yes, this is a “real” companion, but no, we never see her again, because Cressida never sees her again. Here, the random oddities of “real life”—if I were writing a very clever postmodernist story, I would loop back at some point to bring us into the perspective of the unspeaking companion in the vehicle. In mimicry of life, people come and go in the background with no real explanation.

Author: Warmest thanks to you, Joyce, and welcome back from Switzerland!

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