Disrupting Memory: Trauma and Fictions of the ‘War on terror’

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Contents:

Acknowledgements iii

Abstract iv

Introduction

Introduction… 1

Transnational Memory Discourse 7

Transnationalism and the Post-9/11 Trauma Narrative 16

Media, Memory and the 'War on Terror' 22

Trauma and Post-9/11 Fiction from the Margins 30

1. Translating Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Introduction… 43

Bildungsroman… 51

Trauma 65

Emigration to America 77

Witnessing and Return to Agency… 81

Conclusion… 88

2. Shared Graves: Empire and Trauma in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*

Introduction… 92

9/11, Cultural Memory and the Cold War in Afghanistan… 94

Aslam as Transnational Writer 97

Sites of Memory and Trauma: The House 102

Lara, David and the Cold War in Afghanistan… 110

Post-9/11 Afghanistan: Casa, Dunia and James 119

Conclusion: A Shared Grave 133

3. Haunted Communities: Tracing the Ghosts of the 'War on Terror' in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*

Introduction… 141

9/11, Trauma and Worsening Global Relations—Aslam's Response 143

Missing in Afghanistan… 154

The Brick Factory: Torture and Imperial Violence in Afghanistan… 164

Ghost-Making and Haunted Communities: Mourning and Melancholia in Heer 178

Conclusion… 192

4. Agents of War: Patriotism, Perpetrator Trauma and the Iraq War in Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*

Introduction… 203

Transnational Memory after 9/11… 205

Fountain and the Theatre of War 211

Post-9/11 Fiction and the Depiction of Perpetrator Trauma 229

The Invisibility of Iraq in American Post-9/11 Fiction… 244

Conclusion… 254

Conclusion… 259

Works Cited 270

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which transnational fiction in the post-9/11 era can intervene in discourse surrounding the 'war on terror' to advocate for marginalised and excluded perspectives. This study conceptualises global political discourse—as it relates to the 'war on terror' and its attendant conflicts—as characterised by incongruity, with transnational memory frames instituted in Western nations centralising 9/11 as an instance of unique trauma and wilfully excluding the historical and ongoing experiences of Afghans and Iraqis under Western—and mainly American—hegemonic violence. I employ recent developments in trauma studies to understand the ways in which dominant frameworks for conceptualising trauma in the West contribute to this exclusion, failing to account for the type of ongoing suffering common to non-Western, colonial and postcolonial contexts. Specifically, I examine the ways in which authors positioned here as representing marginalised perspectives in the context of the 'war on terror', such as Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*), and Nadeem Aslam (*The Wasted Vigil, The Blind Man's Garden)* respond, in various ways, to these challenges and present narratives that disrupt framings of the 9/11 attacks as a singular instance of global rupture, making space for alternate voices and experiences related to the invasion of Afghanistan. The final chapter also participates in this disruption, examining texts by Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk)* Phil Klay (*Redeployment*) that interrogate the Iraq War as a cynical and imperialistic endeavour, exploring the phenomenon of perpetrator trauma. I argue that the authors studied in this thesis each employ a range of approaches—translation of complex cultural trauma into single catastrophic events, landscapes marred by suffering, the depiction of ghosts and hauntings— that reveal a 'war on terror' and a violent American hegemony that is underpinned by an exclusionary but influential memory discourse in America and other Western nations.

Introduction

This thesis explores the ways in which transnational fiction in the post-9/11 era can intervene in discourse surrounding the so-called 'war on terror' to advocate for marginalised and excluded perspectives. Recent projects—Daniel O'Gorman's *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel,* for example—have addressed the role of fiction in highlighting and challenging "the discursive frameworks within which difference between self and other is conceptualised" since the attacks of September 11, 2001(O'Gorman 2015, 6). Though incorporating notions of difference and othering at various points, this study moves beyond the question of alterity and cross-cultural communication. I conceptualise global political discourse related to the 'war on terror' and its attendant conflicts as characterised by incongruity, with memory frames instituted in Western nations wilfully excluding the historical and ongoing experiences of Afghans and Iraqis under Western—and mainly American—hegemonic violence.

The authors featured in these chapters have been selected for the ways in which they each participate in this discourse, revealing and challenging its imbalance from notably varied perspectives. Fiction set in Afghanistan is the focus of the first three chapters. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is explored in Chapter 1 while Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013a) are studied in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. Afghanistan, a space long caught in cross-hairs of global political manoeuvring, provides a fitting case study for the imbalance and marginalisation that marks memorial practices in the post-9/11 era. In many ways, the fiction selected for these chapters answers the call made by Michael Rothberg in response to Richard Gray's essay "Open Doors, Closed

Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis". Gray advocates for American fiction that reflects "the US as a border territory in which different cultures meet, collide and in some instances collude with each other" (2009, 135). In calling for an American response to 9/11 that is multicultural, Gray champions a post-9/11 fiction that addresses the notion of difference and the Other within American society. Rothberg, in "Failure of Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray", finds Gray's vision of fiction after 9/11 rather narrow and US-centric. Rothberg writes that what is needed, in addition to Gray's multicultural approach within American fiction, is "a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship" (2009, 153). Rothberg explains that

> if Gray's account tends toward the centripetal—an account of the world's movement toward America—I propose a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds. (2009, 153)

The authors featured in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 each deal to various degrees with this "prosthetic reach" of the American empire into Afghanistan, and also that of the Russian and British empires, where relevant.

It is worth outlining this interference in Afghanistan before addressing the ways in which these authors approach its narrative rendering. According to Derek Gregory in *The Colonial Present*, Afghanistan endured British occupation from 1838 until 1919, fighting three wars during this period as the British fought to "beat back the influence of tsarist Russia and secure the borders of its Indian Raj" (2004, 30). American involvement in the region "began in the years after the First World War and accelerated soon after the Second World War" (Gregory 2004, 31). Gregory notes that American intervention during the 1940s was largely focused on infrastructure, attempting to modernise Afghanistan and strengthen the

"power of the Pashtun majority in Kabul" (2004, 33). However, in 1950, Pakistan, having sustained multiple "cross-border attacks by militants demanding the creation of an independent Pashtunistan, temporarily suspended its oil exports to Afghanistan", forcing Kabul to sign "major trade and aid agreements with the Soviet Union" and setting the stage for the arrival of the Cold War in Afghanistan (Gregory 2004, 33).

The involvement of the US and USSR in Afghanistan remained largely confined to military and economic aid packages until 1973 when Daoud Khan, a brother-in-law of the king, led a coup that overthrew the monarchy (Gregory 2004, 33). Daoud Khan served as President until the Saur revolution in April 1978, when the Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party (PDP) launched a coup and "declared the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" (Gregory 2004, 33). This regime brought only further instability as a programme of "social change and reform" sparked resistance from the "traditional elites—religious, tribal, landlord—that had ruled the countryside for generations" (Gregory 2004, 33). Concerned about "armed resistance spilling over its southern border", the USSR "invoked its treaty with Afghanistan" and launched an invasion of Soviet forces in 1979, beginning the brutal Soviet-Afghan War (Gregory 2004, 34).

The Cold War arrived in Afghanistan as American forces, mainly CIA, arrived to prevent communist expansion. According to Barnett R. Rubin, money was pumped into the region, building the infrastructure necessary for war (2013, 54). Various Mujahedeen factions—resistance fighters operating mainly through guerrilla tactics—were funded by the US during this period, with volunteers coming from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other regions. The Soviet-Afghan War lasted from 1979 to 1989 and, beyond the death and destruction wrought throughout Afghanistan, gave rise to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden as powerful forces (Gregory 2004, 36). With the collapse of the USSR, American and Soviet interest in Afghanistan ceased and a vacuum was created in which the Mujahedeen

commanders fought among themselves for dominance in Kabul, Jalalabad and other major cities; this violence stopped with the emergence of the Taliban in 1996 and the beginning of a new chapter of brutality and suffering in Afghanistan's history, ending only with the invasion of US forces in October 2001 following the Taliban's refusal to comply with the search for bin Laden. As of 2018 US forces remain at war in Afghanistan as the country bears further upheaval; the Taliban have proved endlessly resurgent and the presence of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the region continues to cause instability.

Despite this history, dominant memory discourse in the US centralises the 9/11 attacks as an instance of unique trauma and rupture, obfuscating those traumas historically experienced in regions like Afghanistan and Iraq partly as a result of Western hegemony. As Neil Lazarus has noted, the attacks are situated in "most mainstream commentary" in "world-historical terms" (2006, 10). Eóin Flannery expands on this point, arguing that "9/11 is cast and cultivated as a decisive and watershed moment, and its sublime uniqueness is marshalled as justification for repressive actions in domestic and foreign military policy" (2013, 298). By not accounting for traumas experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan in cultural memory frames—an elision that is aided, as we will see, by a Western trauma discourse that is narrow and exclusionary in its conceptualisation of what constitutes trauma—the US is able to sustain the myth of exceptionality and position its response to the 9/11 attacks and the ongoing global effort to quash terrorism as straightforwardly righteous; such exclusionary framing delimits the need to consider the consequences of further intervention into such regions or to examine the role of Western governments and other powerful entities—media, corporations, etc.—in cultivating extremism globally.

For Hosseini in *The Kite Runner,* the task in combatting this framing is one of reconciliation. Hosseini, an Afghan-born American who came to the United States as a refugee during the Soviet-Afghan War, aims to "put a human face" on Afghanistan for a

largely Western audience (2013, III). As the first Afghan novel published in English and an enormously successful international bestseller, *The Kite Runner* is analysed here as a text that sits undeniably at the epicentre of the post-9/11 genre but fails to engage in meaningful dialogue in the terms described by Rothberg, never fully taking Western powers to task for their role in Afghanistan's destabilisation. It is the novel's commercial success, coupled with its instructive shortcomings, that renders *The Kite Runner* an ideal first case study for this project. The novel encapsulates much of the discourse surrounding 9/11 and the 'war on terror', where Afghanistan is a place of curiosity, but little scrutiny ever lands upon American imperial endeavours in the region.

Nadeem Aslam's novels, by contrast, are relentless in their pursuit of the global forces that have worked to undermine Afghanistan's stability. Aslam, in both texts, provides an interesting counterpoint to Hosseini in his more political approach to writing that is less deferential to Western audiences in general. Aslam was born in Pakistan but has lived in Britain since the age of fourteen, viewing the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror' from that remove. Aslam's realises Rothberg's call to map the "outward movement of American power", describing to *The Guardian* an acute awareness of American power abroad during the Cold War, "how words on grey paper in the 1980s became fists, electric wires and instruments of torture which broke members of my family and friends" (Jaggi 2013). While Hosseini's approach to writing about Afghanistan acknowledges, as we will see, the transnational nature of post-9/11 discourse, Aslam adopts a far less 'rooted' approach, never attempting to engage in cross-cultural explanation but instead situating Afghanistan in a global context—politically, economically and militarily dominated by international powers. In *The Wasted Vigil,* as we will see, Aslam moves backward from the post-9/11 invasion, tracing histories of colonial occupation and trauma in Afghanistan. In *The Blind Man's Garden,* the subject of Chapter 3, Aslam shifts his attention to the present-day

imperial endeavours in the region, depicting an imperialism that is arguably no longer prosthetic, but manifesting in prison camps and communities haunted by loss.

Chapter 4 explores the work of two authors, Phil Klay (*Redeployment)* and Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk),* whose work explores the expansion of the 'war on terror' to Iraq. Of course, as with Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 "was not the first time that the shadows of British and American power had fallen across the region" (Gregory 2004, 145). As Gregory notes, it was "a British colonial administration that created the modern state of Iraq out of shards of the broken Ottoman Empire" (2004, 145). In the aftermath of World War II, the "United States intervened time and time again in the political economy of Iraq" (Gregory 2004, 145); the CIA lending support to the Ba'ath party in 1968 paved the way for Saddam Hussein's rise to power (Gregory 2004, 152). As Gabriel Kalko describes the relationship, the United States acted as "Iraq's functional ally" during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) (cited in Gregory 2004, 154); this alliance ended abruptly with the beginning of the Gulf War in 1991, a conflict that killed an estimated 72,500-93,000 Iraqi civilians (cited in Gregory 2004, 168). As explained in Chapter 4, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was targeted for invasion by officials within the Bush administration before 9/11, with the attacks and the launch of the 'war on terror' eventually providing political momentum for a military incursion on tenuous grounds. Iraq has been deeply affected by the invasion, with an estimated 123,000 (Iraq Body Count Project) in civilian casualties and the devastating rise of ISIS in the region.[1]

As we will see, the inclusion in Chapter 4 of two texts taking place largely within a domestic American setting, as opposed to some of the growing body of work produced by Iraqi fiction writers (Hassan Blassim's *The Iraqi Christ* [2013] or Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* [2018], for example), serves a deliberate purpose. Both Klay and

[1] Figures valid for March 2003 - March 2013.

Fountain write from the perspective of American soldiers returned home following tours in Iraq. While, problematically, neither text elucidates the long history of Western interference in Iraq, in dialogue with media framing that promoted the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the exploration of these texts provides an instructive coda to the preceding chapters, challenging the modus operandi of American imperialism from within via the representation of a destructive jingoism and perpetrator trauma.

My interest throughout this thesis lies in the ways in which Hosseini, Aslam, Fountain and Klay present transnational narratives that de-centre the 9/11 attacks as a singular instance of global rupture, making space for marginalised perspectives by accounting for traumatic experiences that are not contained in dominant memory frames in the West or, more so in the contexts described by Hosseini and Aslam, recognised as traumatic in the first instance. I acknowledge that in referring to Afghan and Iraqi voices as "marginalised" and seeking to highlight the inequalities of the transnational memory discourse surrounding 9/11, this thesis remains preoccupied with the Western frame of reference and its various biases and blind spots. This language and focus is not intended to affirm the Western perspective as the most valuable but to draw attention to and critique its undeniable dominance—politically, economically, militarily—in a context where Afghanistan and Iraq are forced into a defensive position from the outset, a dynamic which the authors here highlight and disrupt to varying extents. In doing so, I argue, they reveal the ills and obfuscations of a harmful American hegemony that is underpinned by an exclusionary but influential memory discourse in America and other Western nations.

Transnational Memory Discourse

It is necessary, given this characterisation of the 'war on terror' as a discourse plagued by conflicting memory frames, to first sketch relevant developments in memory studies and illuminate their significance for the present discussion. In 1925 sociologist and philosopher

Maurice Halbwachs published *On Collective Memory,* a text which has proved foundational in the field of memory studies. According to sociologist Lewis A. Coser, Halbwachs determined that memory "is not a given but rather a socially constructed notion" (1992, 22); Coser points out that collective memory is not "some mystical group mind" (1992, 22). Instead, as Halbwachs puts it, though "collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals who remember" (cited in Coser 1992, 22). These individuals—as part of "social classes, families, associations" and all manner of groups— "draw on that context to remember or recreate the past" (Coser 1992, 22). Perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this study, Halbwachs envisions the past as "a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present" (Coser 26).[2] Numerous theorists have echoed and expanded upon Halbwachs' work as the field of memory studies has grown. In *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time,* Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy incorporate the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to further our understanding of memory as something that "does not issue from within" (2003, 8). Bennett and Kennedy argue that "constructing memory is not simply a question of 'expressing' inner subjective feeling" but "rather of tracing one's trajectory through a cultural space, a contemporary landscape of memory" (2003, 8).

In "Globalisation, Universalism and the Erosion of Cultural Memory", Jan Assmann offers important distinctions between different modes of collective memory, differentiating between forms of communicative, cultural and political memory. According to Assmann, communicative memory is a "matter of socialization and communication, like consciousness

[2] Coser draws on sociologist Barry Schwartz to develop this observation and make the qualification that though presentist readings of the past are influential in determining collective memory, "history does not consist of a series of discrete snapshots" (1992, 26). Instead, though a "society's current perceived needs may impel it to refashion the past" there remain significant aspects of memory that are determined by "a common code and a common symbolic canon even amidst contemporary revisions" (Coser 1992, 27).

in general and the acquisition of language" (2010, 122). As Assmann explains in "Communicative and Cultural Memory", communicative memory is not "formalised" through "material symbolisation" and as such "has only a limited time depth" that is typically the "time span of three interacting generations" (2008, 111). By contrast, cultural memory is an "externalisation and objectivation of memory, which is individual and communicative, and evident in texts, images, rituals, landmarks and other 'lieux de mémoire'"—a phrase coined by Pierre Nora to describe any object, place or concept that carries cultural or historical significance (Assmann 2010, 122). Assmann explains that cultural memory "grows over centuries as an interaction between uncontrolled, self-organising bottom-up accretion and controlled top-down institutions" that are "more or less independent of any particular political organisation" (2010, 122). Finally, Assmann defines political memory as similar to cultural memory but distinguished by its dependence on a "top-down" organisational structure wherein memory is in part instituted by the political establishment (2010, 122). In the post-9/11 context, we can recognise memory discourse as comprised of both cultural and political components, the recovery of American identity after the attacks depending upon the reinvigoration of old myths and reinforcement offered by politicians.

Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory,* meanwhile build on Halbwachs' work to trace how cultural memory in particular is shaped by media "of all sorts" that determine the relationship "between the individual and the world" (2009, 1). Erll and Rigney argue that "the very concept of *cultural* memory is premised on the idea that memory can only become collective" through a "continuous process" in which "memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts" (2009, 1). These "symbolic artefacts" refer to the various sites of remembrance within a culture as outlined by Assmann and referenced above (Erll and Rigney 2009, 1); symbolic artefacts "mediate between individuals" and work to "create communality across both space

and time" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 1). As such Erll and Rigney develop Halbwachs' concept of a collective memory that is shaped by the needs of the present, arguing for a "dynamic" understanding of memory as an "ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting" (2009, 2). Within this process, "individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past" and "reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 2); remembering is in this way understood as "active engagement with the past"—as "performative rather than as reproductive" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 2).

As Erll and Rigney argue, this active engagement depends upon and is determined by media that are "more than merely passive and transparent conveyors of information" (2009, 3). Media "play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past" and determining how we will appropriate the past for shaping society in the future (Erll and Rigney 2009, 3). Importantly, Erll and Rigney point out that media are generally not "stable" entities, always approaching the past in the same discrete ways (2009, 3). Instead, media should be regarded as "emergent" in their role as "technologies for meaning-making and networking" that "emerge in relation to each other and in interaction with other" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 3). Like cultural memory itself, the technologies that mediate the past and embed it within processes of remembrance are subject to the demands and influences of the present. Referring specifically to the function of media in formulating cultural memory, Rigney and Erll draw on the work of David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* to introduce the crucial concepts of "remediation" and "premediation" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 3). In "Remembering across Time, Space and Cultures", Erll explains the significance of such concepts within cultural memory studies. Premediation, Erll argues, refers to the fact that "existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for new experience and its representation" (2009, 111). In other words, the representation of certain historical events in media determines how similar present-day events are covered and

interpreted. Erll offers media representation of war as an example of premediation, with coverage of "the colonial wars premediat[ing] the experience of the First World War" (2009, 111). Remediation, by contrast, refers to the fact that "events which are transformed into *lieux de mémoire* are usually represented again and again" (Erll 2009, 111, emphasis in original). Eventually, this results in a situation where memory of a particular event refers less to the "actual event" itself than to the "canon of existent medial constructions" (Erll 2009, 111). We see remediation emerge as a particularly apt concept in the context of the September 11 attacks where so much of the cultural memory surrounding that morning refers to the ways in which the fall of the towers played out over news media.

Understanding these concepts and that the formation of cultural memory is an active process subject to various diverse influences is key to grasping the ways in which memory functions in contemporary political discourse. As Lucy Bond succinctly argues in *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, and Law*, "memory is thus the transient and intangible by-product of the interplay of these elements—premediated by the culture in which it is articulated, and repeatedly remediated by the form of its representation, the agenda behind its production, and the context of its consumption" (2015, 4). Bond argues that these processes "foreground the politics of memory" (2015, 4); they necessitate attention to the ways in which the pathways of "production and reception" are "imbricated in and influenced by broader discourses at work in local, national, and even global cultures" (Bond 2015, 4). Bond invokes Susannah Radstone to argue that understanding processes of mediation can help to "militate against any analysis of memory as reflective of or determined by the past" (2015, 5). Misunderstanding memory as emerging straightforwardly from the past would obfuscate the various political, and geo-political, forces at play in determining how the past is used to advance agendas in the present. As Bond notes, Radstone "conceives the public sphere as constituted by the contrasting interests of diverse groups and institutions"

(2015, 5). As these groups compete for "hegemony", Radstone understands the shaping of cultural memory as a battle ground where "power may be gained or lost as the meaning (and 'ownership') of history is asserted, contested, reasserted, and recontested" (Bond 2015, 5).

Radstone's argument is borne out as we consider the role of cultural memory in the shaping of national identities. As Bond notes, the dynamic nature of cultural memory and its various modes of mediation are not always obvious to the consumer (2015, 10). Bond points out that "when certain frames of memory are naturalised as the normative means of structuring the articulation of particular events and experiences", the dynamics discussed above are "easily elided, producing what appear to be memorial master-narratives" (2015, 10). We can take for example here the various memory narratives surrounding World War I and World War II in the US, Britain, France and Canada. Though highly mediated events whose place in history has been carefully cemented over decades of selective commemoration, cultural memory of these wars does not explicitly acknowledge the impact of the endless television programmes, films and books that have curated their image. Instead, both World Wars have been seamlessly integrated into the master-narratives, the foundational myths, of such nations, each state uncritically adopting the heroic narratives of the wars to bolster national identities and promote unity.

In recent years, however, as memory studies has grown to become a major field of scholarly enquiry spanning numerous areas including history, literature, sociology, psychology, neuroscience and their various intersections, it has adapted to reflect an increasingly globalised reality. In the introduction to *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories,* Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad present one of the earliest treatments of what has emerged as a trend in memory studies examining the increasingly transnational movement of memory discourse. Assmann and Conrad note that "until recently, the dynamics of memory production unfolded primarily within the bounds of the nation state"

(2010, 2). The task of "coming to terms with the past" was considered largely a national endeavour, key in shaping national identities (Assmann and Conrad 2010, 2). However, "under the impact of global mobility and movements" this reality too has shifted so that it is now "impossible to understand the trajectories of memory outside a global frame of reference" (Assmann and Conrad 2010, 2).

A number of recent publications by leading memory scholars have expanded upon these ideas, tracing the ways in which memory is increasingly imbricated in global discourses. In *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney offer a conceptualisation of memory that does not abandon the national framework or suggest its irrelevance, but rather moves to acknowledge the global frameworks that have come to command significant influence. De Cesari and Rigney suggest an understanding of memory as "dynamic" and "operating at multiple, interlocking scales and involving conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations" (2013, 6). In "Transnational Memory and the Construction of History through Mass Media", Aleida Assmann pinpoints the various shifts in global memorial practice that necessitate new modes for considering memory formation (2017). According to Assmann, the transnational nature of contemporary politics can be thought to emerge from four primary sectors in which we have moved away from national models toward shared or globalised formats (Assmann 2017, 66). These include: transnational corporations of global capital; geopolitical groupings such as the European Union or the United Nations; transnational "channels of communication" that allow "individuals all over the world the opportunity to think, to express themselves, and to act beyond their local frameworks" such as the Internet; and lastly, those people that "move in space either voluntarily or under political or social pressure" and make up diasporic communities across the globe (Assmann 2017, 66). The dissolution or devaluation of borders in these ways creates an environment in which memory is no longer reasonably understood as

contained; it can no longer be conceived as something formed in a specific, homogenous cultural space as shared memory based on collective identity and then reinforced over time.[3] Instead, in our globalised world memory can and should be understood as a fluid process involving transactions between multiple actors and mediums.

Of course, as each of the critics named here is careful to stipulate, conceptualisations of memory as transnational must not discount altogether the significance of the nation in cultivating memory frames. In the aftermath of trauma, a terrorist attack for example, the framework of the nation remains the most readily deployed cultural touchstone for grasping the significance of what has occurred. In an introduction to *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, editors Lucy Bond, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen state that the "idea of the nation as a fairly homogenous cultural unit retains its traction as a unifying trope in the wake of traumatic events" (2017, 4). Following recent terrorist attacks in France and Britain, the familiar refrains of 'Vive la France' or the 'spirit of the Blitz' are called upon to remind the wounded and fearful nation of its history and those events that provide the foundation for a resilient national identity—the World Wars providing the most potent symbolism for reunification following a tragedy in these European countries. De Cesari and Rigney emphasise the enduring importance of the national frame, noting that the "term transnational itself crucially" acts as "a reminder" that "even in a so-called post-national age, 'the national'" endures as a powerful "framework for identity and memory-making" (2013, 6). Further, De Cesari and Rigney suggest that the "globalisation of memory practices" has led to a paradoxical reinforcement of "the nation as the social framework par excellence for identity and solidarity", indicating that the nation has not disappeared but has simply been transformed and reconfigured (2013, 6).

[3] As Astrid Erll notes in "Travelling Memory", formulations of memory as nationally bound may have been flawed all along (2011, 8). She points to the "sheer plethora of shared *lieux de mémoire* that have emerged through travel, trade, war, and colonialism" (Erll 2011, 8).

The nation certainly persists as a concern in the work of the authors discussed in this thesis. While Aslam takes what I will describe in Chapter 2 as a more determinedly transnational approach to writing about the post-9/11 wars, Hosseini, Fountain and Klay remain, in different ways and to varied extents, preoccupied with issues of national identity and nationalism. However, this attention to the national frame does not preclude their consideration as transnational writers. As Jie-Hyun Lim succinctly argues, the "most frequent misunderstanding of nationalism is that nationalism is national" (2010, 138). Nationalism and national identities can be regarded as "peculiar transnational phenomena" as they are only possible in a "transnational space" (Lim 2010, 138). Bond, Craps and Vermeulen echo this sentiment as they note that, in general, even where memory is employed to further a specifically "nationalist agenda", these processes can now be regarded as "intrinsically globally orientated" (2017, 4). This statement reflects the fact that in the post-Cold War period "memorative discourses have emerged as the cornerstone of the new geopolitical community" which demands that countries "com[e] to terms with the past" in order to gain entry to bodies like the European Union and the United Nations (Bond, Craps, Vermeulen 2017, 4). Memorial culture is therefore instituted as a prerequisite for effective "participation in the global political arena" (Bond, Craps, Vermeulen 2017, 4). Nations must understand themselves and their histories both independently and in relation to other spaces and histories in order to forge partnerships in an increasingly globalised world. Further, even isolationist ideologies in such a world demand acknowledgement of other nations and a conscious effort to define one's own cultural space against, or in relation to, that of another. In the post-9/11 period, we see this transnationalism emerge as appeals to American national identity are bolstered by expressions of exceptionality and claims of difference to the rest of the international community and Muslim-majority countries like Afghanistan and Iraq in particular.

Transnationalism and the Post-9/11 Trauma Narrative

As numerous critics have noted, the attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 represented a moment of shock and disruption for a superpower and a Western world unused to such interference and violence. As Jenny Edkins describes in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, "wars, genocides, torture and persecutions" were as much a part of the world in the second half of the 20th century as the first, but "were exported for much of it to what was then called the Third World" (2003, 215). Trauma, Edkins remarks, was something distant for most people living in Western Europe and America; for those too young to remember the World Wars or to have experienced Cold War conflicts like Vietnam or Korea, trauma was "dealt with by memorial ceremonies and practices of remembrance" (2003, 215). Edkins comments that 9/11 brought an end to this distance for Americans in particular as catastrophe of this kind was now "no longer remote" (2003, 215). The "trauma lay not so much in the fact of loss but in its manner" as the victims "vanished", leaving behind families with "no bodies to bury, no certainty as to what happened to them" (Edkins 2003, 227).

For Edkins, this indiscriminate violence, the treatment of victims as "bare life", was a "direct challenge" to the "monopoly" of the state (2003, 217). Citing Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* at numerous points throughout her text, Edkins understands the state as an entity that maintains its authority through biological control of the population. Edkins argues that the US government sought to rectify any apparent loss of authority and regain control in two ways. The first was by "declaring war on the terrorists" as a "contending sovereign authority"—a step regarded by Edkins as "unfortunate" given its tacit acknowledgement of terror groups as a cohesive enemy (2003, 228). Related to this, the authorities also set about "state-organised acts of remembrance" that would "return sovereignty to the domain of the government and the sovereign state" (Edkins 2003, 228). According to Edkins, "the dead are reclaimed as belonging to the state", named as

"American" (2003, 228). The tragedy, then, is determined as belonging to the nation, folded into frameworks of national identity and added to the commonality of experience that underpins feelings of belonging. Further, eagerness to claim the attacks as a failure on the part of the government, for Edkins, can be regarded as an effort to reassert the state as that entity with ultimate authority over, and responsibility for, the lives and deaths of its citizenry (216-217). When former National Co-ordinator for Security Richard Clarke sat before the 9/11 commission on 24 March 2004 and uttered the phrase "your government failed you", he was not offering a platitude but a reaffirmation of the state as in possession of a total remit over survival (AP Archive 2015).

In *Trauma and Media*, Allen Meek echoes Edkins' reading of the ways in which the state sought to control the narrative of the attacks in public imagination and eventually in cultural memory. Meek considers in particular the notion of "collective trauma" as it is employed in the recuperation of national identity (2010, 171). He casts doubt on the authenticity of this collective trauma, noting that after 9/11 it was "claimed" that "potentially all Americans and everyone in Western societies experienced a traumatic shock" (Meek 2010, 171). According to Meek, collective trauma became "bound to the imagined community of the nation" (2010, 171); the "supposed shared experience of trauma allowed for a displacement of guilt" for the ills inflicted by Western hegemony globally (Meek 2010, 171). Meek argues that the "construction of 9/11 as traumatic implicitly reaffirmed the moral legitimacy of the West", allowing for the resurrection of "binaries that seemed to belong to an earlier era" (2010, 172;171). If Western leaders used notions of collective trauma to place their citizenries in the role of victim, they also used this designation to locate a precise enemy in Muslim communities. Afghanistan and Iraq, in part because of their status as Muslim-majority countries, were singled out as representing barbarism and intolerance to the West's civilisation and freedom. Importantly, Meek points to the fact that this "therapeutic" model

was not made successful by politicians and state actors alone (2010, 171); the "mass media" played a significant role in shaping those notions of collective trauma that would come to define cultural memory of the 9/11 attacks, to the detriment of Afghanistan and Iraq as the countries targeted during the 'war on terror' (Meek 2010, 171).

Bond provides detailed insight into the processes by which an instance of apparent weakness was transformed – through the media and the use of carefully orchestrated rhetoric – into a moment of righteous awakening for the American nation. Bond draws on Sacvan Bercovitch to explain that the literary and rhetorical genre of the "jeremiad", as employed to great effect in the aftermath of the attacks, is a "quintessential" form for dealing with disaster in an American context—a means of turning "threat into celebration" (cited in Bond 2015, 56). Bond traces the long history of the jeremiad in American consciousness, locating its earliest use as "political sermon in the seventeenth century" and acknowledging its forbearance as a form that "has straddled the terrains of the sacred and the profane, associating transient ideologies with timeless 'divine' truths" (2015, 57).

Most influentially, we can understand the jeremiad as a form used to elevate moments of crisis to the realm of the divine—as tests handed down to try the worthy. As Bond describes, when undertaken by leading political figures, the lament of the jeremiad allows for the often retroactive "conjoining of providence and politics", elevating the presidential figure to "national theologian" responsible for "creating the historical 'truth' of exceptionalism" (2015, 57). Bond points out that in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, what presented as a shattering event of paralysing magnitude was quickly acknowledged not only as traumatic but re-imagined in cultural memory as part of a new trial to test and prove America's innate exceptionalism (2015, 58). Bond quotes the rhetoric of then President Bush and points out the ways in which he positioned the attacks as having singled America out for a "new responsibility to history" (2015, 58). No longer signalling the end of an empire's

imperviousness to outside influence or damage, the attacks were now folded into “the heroic narrative of the United States”, tested by divinity so that it might continue to prevail as a singular, exceptional nation, favoured by God even when appearing forsaken. Within this construction, victims were re-cast as heroes and feelings of helplessness translated to a desire for revenge, or as the jeremiad would have it, to engage in a righteous battle against those who would seek to impugn “American values” (Bond 2015, 65).

The use of the jeremiad in public discourse to promote notions of American exceptionalism is explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. The specific nature of this supposed exceptionalism and its impact on American foreign policy is also discussed in detail in these chapters. For the purposes of this introduction, however, it is merely necessary to trace the ways in which such rhetoric takes on a fundamentally global or transnational aspect and contributes to the silencing of those communities marginalised in a post-9/11 context. As Edward Said describes in an introduction to the 1997 edition of his 1981 book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World,* the decades leading up to 9/11 had seen an “intense focus on Muslims and Islam in the American and Western media”, much of this manifesting as “highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility” (1997a, xi). Said examines the ways in which media narratives in the US had become increasingly determined in their preoccupation with “Islam’s role in hijackings and terrorism” and the “threat” posed to “our way of life” (1997a, xi). In an observation that would come to seem remarkably prescient following the 9/11 attacks, Said notes a “strange revival” in “Orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white, people” (1997a, xi).

Though written before the attacks of 11 September 2001 and thus removed from the specific context of this project, Said’s text is nonetheless valuable for the insight it offers into historical attitudes prevalent in the US toward the Muslim world. As outlined above, the 9/11

attacks are often regarded as representing a singular moment of rupture. However, as Said outlines in the original introduction to this text (1981), Islam and the Muslim world had been consistently singled out as a threat to Western interests—related to oil and the agenda for cultural and economic hegemony—throughout the latter half of the 20th century. In making this observation, of course, Said is careful to point out that "in no really significant way is there a direct correspondence" between the image of "Islam" promoted to "common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people" (1997b, l). He describes a consensus emerging from "the confluence of power bearing upon 'Islam'", this consensus dictated by "the academy, the corporations, the media, the government" and inspiring little "dissent from the orthodoxy it has created" (1997b, lviii).

Said warns that the "gross simplification" of "Islam" and Muslim-majority countries had led to the "stirring up of a new Cold War", and that growing "racial antipathy" could begin "mobilization for a possible invasion" (1997b, lviii). In 1981, of course, the news story dominating headlines and drawing the ire of anti-Muslim sentiment was the Iran hostage crisis; the crisis ended on 20 January 1981 as the Americans held captive for 444 days were released (Said 1997b, lx). This episode and its coverage in news media provides Said with a prime example of the dangerous and Orientalist simplifications he warns against. He cites a description of the hostages by President Jimmy Carter as "Americans" and as "innocents", the two categories seemingly regarded as synonymous (1997b, lxv). Said explains Carter's perspective as drawn from the fundamental belief that "Americans were by definition innocent and in a sense outside history" (1997b, lxv). Said reads such attitudes as suggesting that any group who dared to dislike America or hold Americans captive was "dangerous and sick"; they were "beyond humanity, beyond common decency" (1997b, lxvi). For Said, the belief in the fundamental and intractable innocence of the American side must suggest an

equal belief in the ontological guilt of those nations and communities determined as enemies (1997, lxvi).

Said closes his introduction by calling for "respect for the concrete detail of human experience" and "understanding that arises from viewing the Other compassionately" (1997b, lxx). As we know, however, Said's call for nuance was left unheard as the post-9/11 era gave rise to ever-more virulent anti-Muslim, and anti-Islam, sentiment in America and other Western nations. The designations of "innocent" and "guilty" that Said perceives as having been applied to the parties involved in the Iran crisis were arguably expanded to encapsulate America as a whole as blameless, targeted by a fundamentally malevolent Muslim world. In Edkins' phrasing, the "contest is scripted as the battle of good and evil, a clash of civilisations, or of civilisation against barbarism, not as a political struggle" (2003, 229). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, cultural memory coalesced around an enemy primed for demonization; as Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert put it, Muslims were "positioned as threats to the secular, democratic nation state" (2015, 2). The attacks were pre-mediated in the context of a violent Islam, drowning out calls for nuance and paving the way for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As we will see, this rhetorical sleight of hand is a feature of the discourse of the 'war on terror'. The texts included here, and my analysis, move between discussions of anti-Muslim rhetoric more generally and the specific actions taken against nations like Afghanistan and Iraq. This dual focus is to some extent unavoidable given that the 'war on terror' itself is underpinned by rhetorical foundations that employed broad, Orientalist anti-Muslim framings to transfigure certain nations into enemy territories. Where the violence of the 'war on terror' is characterised, as in Aslam's novels particularly, by both explicit invasion of specific nation states and also generalised mistrust and mistreatment of Muslim communities globally, this must be acknowledged. With the beginning of the 'war on terror'—or what Susan L. Carruthers aptly calls the "global war on terror" (2011, 199)— and

its coverage in news media we see clearly that though couched in nationalistic language, recuperating American national identity was an inherently transnational or transcultural task.

Media, Memory and the 'War on Terror'

Of course, the transformation of rhetoric and prejudices into foreign policy that would support two wars required active engagement across numerous powerful sectors. The use of the jeremiad was followed up by a media establishment that gave tacit approval to its characterisations of both America and its perceived enemies and, with some notable exceptions, aided in mobilising public consent for war. As Carruthers notes, the concept of "terror" captured public attention in the immediate post-9/11 period and found a news media eager to satisfy desire for such coverage (2011, 175). Carruthers traces the media's relationship with terror over 30 years, suggesting that it "looms so large in discussions of terrorism" due to the general understanding of terrorism as "a strategy in which gaining *publicity* is the perpetrator's pre-eminent concern" (2011, 176, emphasis in original). For "political elites", terrorism is "illegitimate violence, perpetrated by non-state actors who launch attacks on innocent civilians without warning or only the most minimal of notice", thereby contravening the mandate of the state to use violence for its own ends (Carruthers 2011, 176). Terrorism, under this definition, "requires media to act as its amplifier" due to the fact that such a disruptive strategy, designed to incite uncertainty and make the status quo seem untenable, only succeeds if the public is made aware of its machinations (Carruthers 2011, 177).

Of course, as Carruthers points out, this interpretation of "what terrorism is and how it succeeds" is "not an incontrovertible fact" (2011, 177). Carruthers notes that critics of this perspective argue that the coverage and "demonization" of terrorists by news media "works entirely to the advantage of states, legitimizing repressive tactics that might otherwise appear much more questionable" (2011, 177). Such concerns, however, have done little to "dent" the

received wisdom, and so counterterrorism strategies have remained focused on "curbing media-coverage" of "pathological attention-seekers" (Carruthers 2011, 177). The role of the media in covering terrorism and counterterrorism has come under increasing scrutiny since 9/11. Carruthers explains that President Bush and his administration framed the 'war on terror' as an "epoch-making struggle against 'Islamofascism'", an ideology "on the march worldwide, preying on the deluded and the disadvantaged" with terror facilitating its expansion (2011, 199). Of course, as Carruthers notes, the logic of the 'war on terror' was questioned by numerous critics enquiring how the Bush administration intended to wage "war on a *tactic"* (2011, 200, emphasis in original).

Such queries, however, did little to destabilise the framing of the invasion of Afghanistan, in the first instance, as a righteous crusade against dangerous and powerful global forces. According to Gregory, though this singling out of Afghanistan was presented as a fait accompli, it was in fact the result of careful manoeuvring on the part of the Bush administration (2004, 47). All of the nineteen men identified as the 9/11 attackers were "Arab nationals" (Gregory 2004, 47). According to Gregory, "most" of these men were Saudi citizens and linked to al-Qaeda but "none were Afghan" (2004, 47). This reality notwithstanding, the Bush administration required a particular geographical location onto which the threat of "terror" could be mapped. As Gregory explains, "if one of the most immediate consequences of September 11 was a visibly heightened projection of America as a national space—closing its airspace, sealing its borders, and contracting itself to 'the homeland'—then its counterpart was surely the construction of a bounded locus of transnational terrorism" (2004, 50). Afghanistan was paradoxically pin-pointed, at least initially, as the imaginative locus for the 'global war on terror'. Despite operating as a global network with interests in more than 40 countries, al-Qaeda was "folded" into Afghanistan in part through the repeated rhetorical association of the two entities (Gregory 2004, 50); in

America's transnational attempt at recovery Afghanistan—its historical turmoil as a result of US interference all but erased— functioned as the visible and "accessible" territory that could be "substituted" for the more diffuse threat of "terror", a process discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 (William Pfaff, cited in Gregory 2004, 51).

As Carruthers notes, President Bush launched military action against Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, ultimately citing the refusal of the Taliban to turn over Osama bin Laden to American custody (2011, 214). "Operation Infinite Justice" was launched to a largely receptive American audience, with the public remaining at what Carruthers calls "a high pitch of emotional intensity" (2011, 214). Perhaps recognising little appetite in the public domain for media coverage that dissented from the official line, the various networks and publications adopted a patriotic stance, with reporters and anchors wearing flag lapel pins (Carruthers 2011, 214). Carruthers describes news media covering the 9/11 attacks and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan as highlighting "the monstrous outrage perpetrated against America" while stressing the "national resolution to punish whoever was responsible and protect citizens against further attacks" (2011, 215). News outlets emphasised unity, with NBC using the tagline "America Strikes Back" while Fox News ran their coverage under the banner "America United" (Carruthers 2011, 215).

Despite this consensus, the Bush administration sought outright control over the media narrative surrounding the war, a goal that necessitated keeping journalists as far from operations as possible (Carruthers 2011, 215). According to Carruthers, requests to embed with military units were initially rejected by the Bush administration; beyond a desire to keep the media at a distance, much of the early fighting was done by Special Forces units with whom embedding would have posed logistical difficulties (2011, 216). Though the Bush administration did eventually relent and allow some reporters to embed with combat units, these special dispensations were reserved for only "a few favoured reporters" and were

limited in their scope (Carruthers 2011, 216). According to Carruthers, frustrated journalists desiring access to the invasion were forced to take on the role of "unilaterals" making their own way into the country (2011, 217). Carruthers explains that "impediments" to this approach such as "mountainous terrain, lack of telecommunications infrastructure" and a general lack of proficiency in Afghanistan's main languages among Western journalists rendered the invasion inaccessible to a broad range of reporters (2011, 217).

This inaccessibility, coupled with inclinations toward patriotism among news media in the early weeks and months of the operation, led to a lack of coverage in the US of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan. According to Carruthers, news outlets were "often extremely reluctant to tackle the issue at all", with organisations from across the ideological spectrum—Fox News, CNN, NPR—fearing that such coverage would amount to promoting "Taliban propaganda" (2011, 222). Such widespread resistance to reporting civilian deaths in Afghanistan contributed to a sanitised view of the war in American media. Of course, as Said points out, coverage of this kind is not necessarily the result of explicit repression or straightforward attempts at propaganda on the part of the state (1997b, 49). Despite the "extraordinary variety" of news outlets available in America and other Western states, there exists a "tendency to favour certain views and certain representations of reality over others" (Said 1997b, 49). Though news organisations might strive toward "objectivity, factuality, realistic coverage and accuracy," they are nonetheless driven by a range of biases and outside influences, resulting in an industry that is the product of "a complex process of usually deliberate selection and expression" (Said 1997b, 50). According to Carruthers, it was left to groups like Human Rights Watch to account for civilian casualties in Afghanistan, with news organisations like Al Jazeera leading the charge outside the US.

When it came to the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, the same degree of consistent public consensus could not be found. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the Iraq War was the

result of a contrived effort of Bush administration officials to extend the mandate of the 'war on terror' to fulfil longstanding agendas in the Middle East. The decision to invade was met with worldwide protest, with millions marching in cities across the globe to demonstrate their opposition. A Gallup poll published on 24 March 2003 indicates that support for the war among Americans was at approximately 72%, an approval rating that diminished rapidly as the war proceeded and questions were raised as to the existence of the Weapons of Mass Destruction that had been put forth as casus belli (Newport 2003). According to Carruthers, despite initial support for the war and having enjoyed a relatively friendly media reception during the invasion of Afghanistan, the Bush administration and the military sought to place stringent control on media access to the Iraq War through the implementation of an embedding programme (2011, 225). This programme provided roughly 600 reporters, largely American and British, with access to the warzone, though their reporting was limited in significant ways. According to Mike Gasher, much of the coverage in American media of the initial incursion was preoccupied with the technological might of the US military and its allies, eliding the devastation wrought by this prowess (2005, 217).

Of course, despite willingness among many American news media outlets to promote favourable views of both wars and attempts to control the reporting of journalists given direct access, a number of investigative reporters such as British journalists Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn have become well-known as a result of their often-critical accounts of the incursions into both Afghanistan and Iraq. In his 2016 volume *The Age of Jihad,* Cockburn traces present-day instability back to the post-9/11 period, taking American and British authorities to task for hasty and cynical interference that has led to the emergence of ISIS among other disastrous outcomes. Cockburn's book takes the form of a collection of journal entries made over more than a decade. In an entry from 4 June 2006, he derides the "editorial decisions" made in New York that regularly sent young reporters into the field to find "the

good news from Iraq", an assignment that only became less common once President Bush lost popularity after his administration's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (2016, 139).

Despite the efforts of reporters such as Cockburn and Fisk, the broader media establishment offered little rebuttal to the 'clash of civilisations' narrative established by the Bush administration in the early years of the 'war on terror'. According to Halim Rane, such narrow perspectives are significant because news media "tell people what to think about by way of the issues and events they decide to cover" (2014, 2). Rane suggests that the "power of media stems from an ability to reach mass audiences and to become a primary source of information about people, places and events that the audience has not directly experienced" (2014, 2). In this way, media frames can shape public discourse around post-9/11 conflicts with a reach and influence arguably unparalleled by any other medium. R.M. Entman describes media framing as a process wherein "some aspects of a perceived reality" are selected and emphasised so as to "make them more salient in communicating text" in order to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (1993, 52). Entman argues that frames are used to "define problems", "make moral judgements" and "suggest remedies" (1993, 52).

In this way, news media are able to present conflicts as inevitabilities or necessities and silence dissenting voices. Rane argues that, when examined with this construction in mind, coverage of the 'war on terror' is revealed to display Orientalist bias and complicity in the project of mobilising consent for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2014, 2). In a manner that recalls Said, Rane suggests that coverage of the Muslim world in the West is typically limited to discussion of terrorist attacks in which violent extremist organisations are the responsible party (2014, 2). By focusing on such groups as representative, a perception is cultivated in which Muslims are posited as the violent, misogynistic, and irrational Other whose very

existence represents a threat to 'Western' values. Rane argues that the exclusion of "more representative stories and images that provide a more complete picture" creates the "narrow, skewed perspective" in which Muslims fit the stereotype of the fanatical terrorist (2014, 2). In this way, the media participates in creating a pervasive image of Muslim communities—pared down eventually to specific territories like Afghanistan and Iraq—against which American exceptionalism and dominance can be defined and reaffirmed in the post-9/11 era.

Of course, the framing techniques implemented to achieve this construction are largely imperceptible and so suggest to the viewer that they are enjoying an unobstructed and impartial view of global events. According to Judith Butler, this creates a "viewer who assumes him or herself to be in an immediate (and incontestable) visual relation to reality" (2009, 73). In other words, just as media are shaping discourse by creating distance between the public and the complex nature of the events they are witnessing, they are insistently reinforcing the notion that such distance does not exist. Contemporary media culture thrives on a myth of immediacy which allows the viewer or reader to imagine that their news is largely unmediated and free from the influences and agendas of broader power structures. As described above, the formation of cultural memory requires particular framings of the past to be reinforced consistently over multiple mediums and over time. According to Barbie Zelizer, journalism plays a "systematic and ongoing role in shaping the ways in which we think about the past" (2014, 379). Zelizer argues that journalism is tasked with "providing the first draft" of history while leaving successive and final drafts for the consideration of historians and novelists (2014, 379). Journalists and news media in general aspire to a "sense of newsworthiness that is derived from proximity, topicality, and novelty" (Zelizer 2014, 379). These are criteria which seem to preclude a focused interest on past events or remembering. Yet in "making sense of the present" journalists often rely on the past for frames of reference which might make current events more immediately intelligible to

audiences (Zelizer 2014, 381). These references help journalists "build connections, suggest inferences, create story pegs, act as yard sticks for gauging an event's magnitude and impact, offer analogies, and provide short-hand explanations" (Zelizer 2014, 381). In making reference to past events alongside current events, the former are further cemented within the archive of cultural memory while the latter are elevated in importance by association. As is discussed in Chapter 4, much of the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' depended upon recalling cultural memory of WWII that would create implicit associations between the US-led coalition and the allied forces, while al-Qaeda, the Taliban and eventually Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq filled the role of the Third Reich as existential enemy.

Of course, the framing of the 9/11 attacks and the 'war on terror' has not remained static in the seventeen years since September 2001. Bond distinguishes five phases of commemoration, each phase witnessing a shift in the perception of the attacks and their aftermath in public imagination. According to Bond, the first phase lasted until the invasion of Afghanistan and is characterised by determined and uniform adherence to narratives of collective trauma in the US (2015, 8). The second phase lasted until 2004 and saw these narratives embed into cultural memory as "articulations of 9/11 coalesced around discourses of patriotism and freedom that accompanied the waging of war in Iraq and Afghanistan" (2015, 8). Bond argues that the third stage, from 2005 to Barack Obama's election in 2008, found a diversification of interpretations as a "more nuanced and reflexive critical debate began to emerge from the American academy", a debate buoyed by the waning popularity of the Bush administration due to Hurricane Katrina and the "sentencing of the soldiers responsible for abuse in Abu Ghraib" (2015, 9). For Bond, phases four and five are characterised by a tempering of rhetoric and a commitment to end the war in Iraq from the newly-elected Obama administration as the tenth anniversary of the attacks approached (2015, 9-10).

However, despite the injection of nuance and efforts from politicians and across mass media in America and Western Europe to undo or mitigate the implied 'us' versus 'them' frames of the post-9/11 period, certain pre-coded associations between Islam or Muslims and terrorism persist. The destabilisation of the Middle East, aided by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, has given rise to ISIS and has helped precipitate a global refugee crisis, the worst seen by European shores since WWII. Terror attacks in Paris, London, New York, Manchester and numerous other Western cities since 2015 have exacerbated—with the help of rising, opportunistic right-wing political forces in these countries—anti-Muslim sentiment. There is, of course, no shortage of voices urging care and differentiating between the 2 billion people practicing Islam worldwide and a comparatively tiny group of terrorists manipulating a religion for their own ends; however, these individuals and groups are constantly fighting against a pre-established narrative, seemingly embedded deep in the collective psyche of the West. The terror attacks in Paris in late 2015, for example, yielded the Twitter hashtag #StopIslam before more reasoned responses could emerge, demonstrating that conversations around terrorism and Islam continue to traverse the same ground. As a result, the 'clash of civilisations' frame lives on, feeding xenophobic narratives that suggest the admission of desperate refugees fleeing the very forces feared for their terrorism in Western cities would result in an inevitable erosion of so-called 'Western culture'.

Trauma and Post-9/11 Fiction from the Margins

The apparent intractability of these associations in cultural memory is of interest to the novelists discussed in this thesis. For Hosseini and Aslam in particular, taking up the mantel of the transnational novelist in the post-9/11 context means challenging these frames by giving voice to those perspectives unaccounted for by dominant narratives in Western cultural memory surrounding the attacks. They address a transnational memory discourse that is haunted by imbalance, as we have seen, with undue power and influence falling to the US

and its coalition partners. Bond elucidates this imbalance in post-9/11 memorial culture, noting that recent scholarly efforts to re-frame memorial processes along transnational or transcultural lines have failed to adequately account for "problematic dynamics of material memorial culture" in their preoccupation with the "unbounded ethical potential" of new paradigms (2015, 89). In particular, Bond highlights the ways in which traumatic narratives are communicated unevenly across borders, with traumas from spaces like Afghanistan and Iraq devalued. Bond draws on Terri Tomsky who offers the concept of the "trauma economy", describing a "circuit of movement and exchange" whereby traumatic memories are "mediated by 'economic, cultural, discursive and political structures'" (cited in Bond 2015, 89). Ultimately, traumas like the Holocaust or 9/11 find "hegemonic capital through their cultural visibility, political impact, and social, ideological, or even economic, weighting" (Bond 2015, 89). As Rothberg argues in *Multidirectional Memory,* the status of such traumas as standard bearers need not necessarily function to silence suffering from other, less visible cultural spaces; traumas like the Holocaust can instead be employed in the articulation of such suffering and vice versa. However, as Rothberg acknowledges, the invocation of dominant traumatic paradigms such as that represented by the Holocaust can also often function to drown out, rather than elevate, the voices of marginalised communities and exacerbate suffering (2009, 19). As we see in Chapter 4, in the post-9/11 period the framework of the Holocaust was employed to articulate notions of collective trauma in the US and emphasise the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, with the inevitable suffering of Iraqi civilians rendered irrelevant.

This inequality regarding the visibility of various traumatic narratives and their impact on global politics is not simply a product of imbalanced or asymmetrical memorial processes. As has been pointed out by numerous scholars in recent years, the marginalisation of suffering belonging to some groups is in part the result of a trauma studies community—

both clinical and cultural—that is narrow and exclusionary in its conceptualisation of what constitutes a traumatic experience. As Alan Gibbs writes in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives,* recent decades have witnessed the rise of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and trauma as "ubiquitous terms of diagnosis in America and across the West", provoking Radstone to describe trauma as an emerging "theoretical orthodoxy" (2014, 1). However, Gibbs does not celebrate this "creeping ubiquity", describing a field lacking in definitional rigour (2014, 1). Unpacking what he sees as troubling inconsistencies in the theory and application of trauma, Gibbs begins by describing the ways in which PTSD is "constructed", with a "collection of symptoms" artificially drawn together as a "unified syndrome" and "self-perpetuating" (2014, 3). In this Gibbs invokes Allan Young's work in in *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, which describes trauma as emerging "in the scientific and clinical discourses of the nineteenth century" before finding acceptance as an official clinical diagnosis with the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-III* (*DSM-III)* in 1980 within the context of post-Vietnam politics (2014, 3). Following Young, Gibbs argues that PTSD emerged as a socio-political category as much as a medical one, urged on by both veterans' advocacy groups and feminist activists (2014, 4).

Gibbs and other critics (Ruth Leys, for example) have challenged trauma theory—championed most influentially in its cultural and literary form by Cathy Caruth (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* [1995]*; Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* [1996]*)* and Dominck LaCapra *(Writing History, Writing Trauma* [2001])—for its inconsistencies. Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996, 11). This definition has incurred criticism, in particular for its emphasis on "belatedness", Caruth's notion that traumatic experiences are not "assimilated as they occur" and therefore

are unavailable to memory, only making themselves known to the sufferer later in the form of intrusive flashbacks that are precise or literal reproductions of the traumatic event (1996, 5). Caruth's definition of trauma, of course, relies heavily on Freud, though her work has been criticised for "distorting" his writings on the topic (Gibbs 2014, 10). In *Trauma: A Genealogy,* Ruth Leys describes Freud as a "founding figure" of trauma, tracing the ways in which his conception of the traumatic condition evolved over time (2000, 18). Freud's early work on trauma, "The Aetiology of Hysteria", introduced the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or "deferred action" (Leys 2000, 20). For Freud, trauma "was constituted by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was inherently traumatic" (Leys 2000, 20); trauma is incurred where meaning is conferred on a past event "only by a deferred act of understanding or interpretation" (Leys 2000, 20). Later writings (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) proposed trauma as a "rupture or breach in the ego's protective shield" (Leys 2000, 23). Thus trauma was an "economic" problem in which an experience "presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way", resulting in "permanent disturbances of the manner in which energy operates" (cited in Leys 2000, 23).

However, according to Gibbs and Leys, though drawn from Freud, Caruth's implementation of belatedness is actually "much closer to the model of an infectious disease" wherein an "incubation period" occurs between "the initial infection and the subsequent appearance of symptoms" (Gibbs 2014, 10). Further, Gibbs notes Freud's acknowledgment that "trauma is often banished from consciousness deliberately and knowingly, rather than unconsciously erased through amnesia" (2014, 10). As Gibbs points out, drawing on Ann Kaplan, though Caruth's "rigid" notions of belatedness—disallowing the complexity of how victims will experience trauma according to their particular circumstances—have been

criticised as "fallacy" outside the humanities, literary and cultural theory on the subject remains preoccupied with the Caruthian model (2014, 10-12).[4]

In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Craps similarly emphasises trauma's emergence as "a Western artefact" (2012, 20) with roots in the 19th century and criticises Caruth's theories of the condition (2012, 31). Beyond the definitional concerns raised by Leys and Gibbs, Craps presents a critique of dominant trauma models (PTSD and cultural theory) that is most relevant to the concerns of this thesis in its specific focus on the ethical potential of trauma theory in a postcolonial context, as well as on current failings in this area. According to Craps, trauma as it is understood by dominant models "is rooted in a particular historical and geographical context", in a "variety of medical and psychological discourses dealing with Euro-American experiences of industrialisation, gender relations and modern warfare" (2012, 20). This is a reality long ignored by "academic researchers, including activist scholars fighting for public recognition of the psychic suffering inflicted on the socially disadvantaged" (Craps 2012, 21). Specifically, Craps cites Laura Brown's critique of PTSD definitions as laid out in the *DSM* ("Not Outside the Range") to stress the ways in which dominant trauma models are based on and fail to adequately account for experiences outside of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (2012, 20). Trauma, then, is conceptualized as "that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other", excluding experiences that impact the everyday lives of those who experience trauma born of structural inequality and oppression—racism, sexism, and colonial

[4] Addressing gaps in recall of trauma for the individual, Gibbs points to work done by Richard McNally in noting that where the traumatic event is "unavailable" this may not be "through a failure of memory" per se but "because it was never encoded in the first place" (2014, 11). McNally points out that early definitions of PTSD "emphasised that traumatic experiences were all too memorable" only to be revised in *DSM-III-R* to include reference to "psychogenic amnesia" as a symptom of trauma (2005, 10). McNally argues that a "failure to encode every aspect of a traumatic experience"—such as when an "event is rapidly unfolding", for example—should "not be confused with an inability to recall an aspect that has been encoded" (cited in Gibbs 2014, 11). For Gibbs, this "challenges the popular idea that traumatic memory is different in this respect, whereas in fact events in life are frequently insufficiently encoded into memory to allow accurate recall" (2014, 11).

violence, for example (Brown, cited in Craps 2012, 21).[5] As Craps points out, these "criticisms of the individualizing, psychologizing, pathologizing, and depoliticizing tendencies of the dominant trauma model" were "anticipated" by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2012, 28). Fanon argues that "colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'", pointing out the importance of addressing the "depth of the injuries inflicted upon a native during a single day spent amidst the colonial regime" and noting a "mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression" (1961, 200-201).

However, Craps argues that the solution to the exclusion described here is not in seeking equivalences between experiences so that "hegemonic definitions of trauma" can be straightforwardly applied to those groups not catered for by original conceptualisations (2012, 21). Such application, particularly across cultures, would "take for granted" the universality of such definitions and ignore their cultural specificity (Craps 2012, 21). According to Craps, "it can be argued that the uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism" (2012, 22). Belief in the universal applicability of trauma or PTSD is damaging in its tendency to ignore the ways trauma is experienced across and within cultures—a shortcoming which Craps again traces, in part, to the criteria of trauma as laid out in the *DSM* (Craps 2012, 23). Criterion A, as it appeared in the 1980 version of the *DSM,* in particular, is noted as problematic in its definition of a traumatic stressor as an event that "would evoke significant symptoms of distress in most people", a definition, in its focus on a singular

[5] It is important to note that Brown does not venture as far as the inclusion of colonial violence in her own reading of trauma theory's limitations; this would be extrapolated by later critics (Craps 2012) building on her work to address trauma in the postcolonial context. Gibbs points out that there is a "slight Western bias" in Brown's list of culturally advantaged groups in that she "does not mention 'western' or 'American' except by implication" (2014, 16). Gibbs reads this as a "laudable" attempt on Brown's part to attempt a "localised theory of trauma, thus resisting the temptation to universalise" (2014, 16). At the same time, however, Gibbs notes it as a curiosity that Brown "overlooks the colonial experience as a key marker of insidious trauma" in her critique of the punctual model (2014, 17).

traumatic experience, that excludes groups for whom oppression is systemic (Craps 2012, 25). According to Craps, though this definition has been broadened in "almost each successive version" of the *DSM,* "many feminists and multicultural clinicians and researchers" argue that it remains "narrow enough to make some important sources of trauma invisible and unknowable" (2012, 25).[6] *DSM 5,* published in 2013, allows for "repeated exposure to the distressing details of an event", acknowledging the cumulative effects of exposure to trauma but remaining insistent on the event-based model.

According to Craps in "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory in the global age", focusing on a "single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" conceptualised as occurring within an "individual psyche" can "leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse, such as racism, economic domination or political oppression" (2014, 50). Such conceptualisations of trauma—the focus also of cultural and literary models—problematically lend themselves to what Craps calls "Western notions of trauma recovery" in which the sufferer can be "returned to a state of normality" (2014, 53). Citing Ethan Watters' study of trauma in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami, Craps argues that applying therapeutic practices that follow "Western" trauma models can "undermine local coping strategies" (2012, 23). Further, as Craps points out, and as we will see in the chapters to follow, such focus on notions of recovery—where the sufferer undergoes healing but the structural conditions enabling oppression are unchallenged—can elide the reality of life in the

[6] Craps acknowledges several times that "concrete suggestions" for expanding dominant definitions of trauma have been offered (2012, 25). These include: type II traumas (Terr); complex PTSD (Herman); and insidious trauma (Root). Craps remarks that these "attempts to go beyond or diversify the DSM definition of trauma can assist in understanding the impact of everyday racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of structural oppression" (2012, 25). As Craps notes, the "chronic psychic suffering" engendered by such experiences "does not qualify for the PTSD diagnosis" where, as is typical, the "an overt threat or act of violence is absent" (2012, 26). Importantly, Craps notes that cultural trauma theory "remains oriented around the Freudian model that underlies and informs the psychiatric profession's official codification of trauma as PTSD" and takes "no account of recent developments in psychological research" (2012, 31).

context of "unrelenting, generalised trauma", as experienced in conflict zones, for example (2014, 54).

Importantly, Craps does not suggest that trauma theory as a field is irredeemable, but rather that more inclusive approaches should be taken to account for trauma occurring in non-Western spaces and to individuals or communities whose suffering is unaccounted for by limited Western definitions. In particular, Craps advocates for a movement away from literary trauma theory's single-minded focus on "experimental, modernist textual strategies" so that "the sufferings of non-Western and minority groups" can be acknowledged "for their own sake and on their own terms" (2014, 50). Assumptions regarding the fitness of only "anti-narrative, fragmented, modernist, forms" to represent trauma as understood by dominant Caruthian theory risks establishing a narrow canon of trauma writing that favours "Western writers" since modernism is primarily "a European cultural tradition" (2014, 50).[7] Such modes of writing trauma in the first instance may well be developed upon tenuous or erroneous understandings of the condition. Gibbs notes that such approaches are built upon concepts of traumatic memory that insist upon its precise repetition in flashbacks and nightmares where the event could not be integrated into narrative memory due to the power of the psychic shock induced in the individual (2014, 14). As Gibbs points out, however, this concept of the literality of traumatic memory (championed influentially by Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk [1995]) has been criticised as without "convincing scientific or clinical evidence" by numerous scholars (2014, 15).

Nevertheless, these claims have "proved highly influential amongst Caruth and her followers" (Gibbs 2014, 14). As Gibbs notes, the notion that the traumatic event literally

[7] In this critique of Western trauma theory as being overly fascinated with the suitability of modernist narrative forms in the representation of trauma, Craps draws on work done by Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Jan Wilson in "Constructing Shared Histories: Stolen Generations Testimony, Narrative Therapy and Address" in *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time* (2003).

returns in flashbacks and nightmares, unmediated by processes that would ordinarily confer "psychic meaning", suggests for Caruth that trauma cannot be represented directly but can only be transmitted to a reader in its inaccessibility (2014, 14). Thus there is an assumption within "Caruthian theory" that "trauma in art and literature […] is unrepresentable, or only representable through the employment of radically fragmented and experimental forms" (Gibbs 2014, 14).[8] Dealing with the exclusionary implications of this orthodoxy, Craps invokes Roger Luckhurst's work in *The Trauma Question* to argue that the "crisis of representation" thought to be caused by traumatic experiences need not limit the types of narratives capable of capturing the nature of such suffering (2014, 51). Importantly, Craps does not dismiss such modes as "inherently Eurocentric" or "uphold any particular alternative as a postcolonial panacea" (2012, 5). Instead, Craps argues that by taking "account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received", trauma theory can allow for the "diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate" (2014, 51).

This thesis notes Craps' insistence on multiplicity and diversity within trauma writing, examining authors whose work gives voice to marginalised perspectives in the post-9/11 context. I argue that, in various ways, each author featured here recognises the inequalities of post-9/11 memorial processes and, by communicating traumatic narratives not contained in Western memory, disrupts dominant memory frames that position the attacks as a singular instance of global rupture. I examine the ways in which these authors adopt modes of trauma writing that speak to the difficulties of communicating trauma across cultural contexts, variously adhering to and deviating from dominant, Western-orientated

[8] Beyond the concerns over theories of belatedness and literality described here, Gibbs points to another important oversight in literary trauma theory insisting on the use of fragmented narratives; according to Gibbs, "transmissibility", where avant-garde narrative forms will somehow pass on the effects of trauma to the reader, is implausible (2014, 28). Further, Gibbs notes that "to suggest [that transmission] somehow mimics the original experience of trauma is deeply problematic" (2014, 28).

understandings of trauma. Importantly, none of the texts included here break completely from the type of highbrow, experimental forms of trauma writing described by Craps. Each author does, however, resist or demonstrate the flaws in this orthodoxy, and Western trauma theory more generally, so that they reveal and challenge the ways in which certain types of suffering are excluded from hegemonic definitions.

In *The Kite Runner* (2003), Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini attempts to make Afghanistan more than "just another unhappy, chronically troubled afflicted land" (foreword 2013, III). In Chapter 1, I argue that Hosseini achieves this in a narrative that traces his protagonist Amir's journey through political and personal turmoil, and, crucially, as a witness to trauma. At twelve years of age, Amir is a bystander to the rape of his childhood friend Hassan; his own inaction during the assault traumatises Amir and leads him to a lifetime spent seeking redemption. The chapter traces the ways in which Hosseini presents this assault as an allegory for the national rupture that occurs in Afghanistan during the mid-1970s as the country experiences the collapse of the monarchy and the invasion of Soviet forces. I explore Hosseini's position in post-9/11 discourse as a transnational author who takes on the role of the diasporic writer, translating Afghanistan's historical and cultural trauma specifically for a Western reader presumed to be unfamiliar with the effects of this ongoing instability. I argue that Hosseini's novel offers insight into Afghan society and adopts a multi-layered narrative form in order to undermine the idea that Afghanistan must atone for the 9/11 attacks. However, as noted above, I argue that Hosseini's text elides much of the complexity of Afghanistan's recent history. Hosseini's deviation from the norms of Western trauma writing is the most limited of the authors studied here; while his novel unfolds in a largely straightforward, linear fashion, Hosseini's rendering of trauma and its effects sticks close to the fragmented form meant to mimic the effects of traumatic rupture in an individual psyche—a form that eventually reveals itself as unsuitable for the rendering of

colonial trauma. By positioning Amir's halted bildungsroman—as the result of a childhood trauma for which he bears questionable responsibility—as an allegory for Afghanistan's beleaguered and misunderstood image on the world stage, Hosseini calls into question notions of redemption and forces readers to reconfigure their understanding of victimhood in a post-9/11 context. On the other hand, the novel neglects the trauma experienced by Hassan, a member of an ethnic minority, and ultimately reproduces his oppression. Further, in depicting Amir's recovery from trauma—and, via allegory, that of Afghanistan—Hosseini closes the narrative with an un-earned and simplistic catharsis for the reader, allowing us to avoid dealing with Afghanistan's ongoing trauma under the post-9/11 US invasion.

In Chapter 2, I argue that British Pakistani author Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) is less concerned with notions of cross-cultural understanding. Adopting fully the stance of the transnational novelist, Aslam situates 9/11 on a continuum of global violence, highlighting the ways in which Afghanistan has functioned throughout its history as an unwitnessed flashpoint in the disputes of international powers. Aslam approaches Afghanistan's history with a broader lens than that of Hosseini, tracing its present-day turmoil to British presence in the region during the 19th century. *The Wasted Vigil* maps for readers the connection between violence wrought by an emergent American hegemony in Afghanistan during the Cold War and the resultant emergence of extremist groups, leading eventually to the post-9/11 invasion. This chapter examines the ways in which *The Wasted Vigil* unpacks Western media and cultural memory frames of Afghanistan, giving voice to those perspectives typically silenced or marginalised in post-9/11 discourse. Through the representation of cultural trauma as experienced by individual characters the likes of which are excluded from contemporary media frames and whose stories are not contained in cultural memory, Aslam succeeds in highlighting the impact of the US and Soviet presence in Afghanistan during the Cold War.

In Chapter 3, I examine Aslam's 2013 novel *The Blind Man's Garden* as an example of trauma writing from the margins of post-9/11 discourse that traces the suffering wrought in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the attacks. Focusing on the plight of the community in Heer, a fictional Pakistani town, Aslam examines the impact of worsening ideological intransigence across the globe in the decade since September 2001. Following Craps' writing on the potential of "haunting" in representing postcolonial trauma, I introduce the concept of "ghost-making" in examining Aslam's treatment of families and communities destroyed by the disappearance of loved ones at US-run prison camps (2012, 61). I draw on Giorgio Agamben to employ theories of biopower and examine the ways in which individuals are reduced to "bare life" in the reaffirmation of American hegemonic dominance, creating communities permanently—and sometimes dangerously—caught in cycles of un-resolved mourning. In neither *The Wasted Vigil* nor *The Blind Man's Garden* does Aslam abandon experimental or fragmented narrative form in depicting trauma in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, I argue that this disjointedness is not in service of trauma's supposed irrepresentability or elitist notions regarding the suitability of avant-garde forms for the representation of such suffering. As we will see, Aslam focuses instead on the rendering of oft ignored legacies of colonial trauma as insistently recurring through the physical environment and ghostly apparitions, demonstrating the potential contained within experimental narrative forms when applied with due care to a given subject matter or setting.

In Chapter 4, I discuss Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk)* and Phil Klay (*Redeployment)* as authors whose contributions to the post-9/11 fiction genre challenge American imperialism during the 'war on terror' from 'within'. I employ the work of Jean Baudrillard to examine the ways in which Fountain's text provides a glimpse into American culture in the post-9/11 period, demonstrating the jingoism that underpinned and sustained the invasion of Iraq. The shift in focus to authors representing the perspective of the

American soldier also allows this thesis to capture a further aspect of trauma as incurred in the post-9/11 context: that of the perpetrator. While these authors do focus on individual trauma and, particularly in Fountain's case, frequently employ fragmented narrative forms in capturing the effects of PTSD, they break significantly from cultural trauma theory's singular focus on the victim. Both texts feature the plight of the American soldier, returned home and suffering, to various degrees, from PTSD. Though fitting within standard definitions of trauma, the PTSD featured here is contextualised within narratives of American exceptionalism and imperialism where such diagnoses are used, in a Foucauldian sense, to neutralise the political potency of such suffering. I posit that by highlighting the traumatic experiences of the soldier, and framing them explicitly as perpetrators, Fountain and Klay are able to reclaim these narratives from the state and, by interrogating the notion of sacrifice, reveal the war as a cynical endeavour that was damaging for both foreign and domestic populations. However, I argue that these final two authors fail to deliver fully on their critique of American imperialism due to an insistence on foregrounding American war-time trauma—and then only that of the male soldier with the suffering of American women dealt with only tangentially—over the suffering of Iraqi civilians.

1

Translating Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

> "They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gunfire was not yet born".
>
> Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner* 2003, 34)

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 to what David Jefferess describes as "little fanfare" (2009, 389). As the first Afghan novel published in English, *The Kite Runner* eventually garnered attention in a post-9/11 political climate fascinated by the potential for insight offered by the novel's setting and subject matter. Jeff Zaleski of *Publishers Weekly* praised the novel for its representation of an "obscure nation" that had become "pivotal in the global politics of a new millennium" (cited in Jefferess 2009, 389). Hosseini's novel found a wide readership, particularly in North America, and "spent more than five years on the *New York Times* bestseller list" (Jefferess 2009, 389). It was also made into a film in 2007, thus cementing its cultural significance and bringing Hosseini's story to an ever-wider audience.

The enduring popularity of Hosseini's novel speaks to its role as part of the narrative running contrary to the rhetoric of hatred and demonization of Muslim populations fostered in the post-9/11 era. The importance of a novel such as this should not be underestimated, especially when one considers its release during what was for a new generation Afghanistan's entrance onto the global political scene. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 brought

unprecedented attention to a region that had been summarily ignored by conceptions of history formulated by the West, despite the role that Western politics has had in its development and much of its turmoil. Hosseini's novel therefore takes on the task of advocating for Afghanistan in a Western context whose dominant discourse had effectively reduced it to "the caves of Tora Bora and poppy fields and Bin Laden" (Hosseini 2013, III). In a foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Kite Runner,* Hosseini describes feeling satisfaction at the notion that his novel "helped make Afghanistan a real place" for readers (2013, III). Hosseini acknowledges a worldwide audience in "India, South Africa, and Tel Aviv" and specifies Western readers in "Sydney, London and Arkansas", noting his personal experiences in California as influential in his writing (2013, III); he expresses delight that *The Kite Runner* has helped to make Afghanistan more than "just another unhappy, chronically troubled, afflicted land" for his readers and that they come away able to "put a personal face" on his homeland (2013, III).

The Kite Runner tells the story of two young Afghan boys, Amir and Hassan, the latter the servant of the former, whose lives are shaped by the perpetual conflict that grips Afghanistan in the latter half of the 20th century: Russian occupation; the upheaval caused by Mujahideen warlords; the rise of the Taliban. We mainly follow the emotional toll these events take on Amir, who is established within the novel as Hosseini's primary representative or narrative double. In the foreword to his novel, Hosseini admits that his "childhood and Amir's mirrored each other in many ways" (2013, I). Amir's childhood in Afghanistan is one of relative privilege; as the son of a wealthy businessman and a member of the Pashtun upper-class—Afghanistan's dominant ethnic majority—Amir is shielded from the worst of the violence in his country unlike, as we will discover, his Hazara counterpart, Hassan. By the novel's end Amir is a citizen of the United States and effectively an outsider in his country of origin; due to ongoing conflict he is denied the opportunity to remain in

Afghanistan and instead is forced to emigrate with his father and pursue his career as a writer in the West. In San Francisco, Amir settles and marries Soraya, a fellow Afghan emigrant, and continues to grapple with his identity as an Afghan American. In the novel's later stages, Amir, now an established novelist in the West, returns to Afghanistan to witness what has become of the world he left behind. On this trip Amir finally comes to terms with the trauma which forced his emigration and the collapse of his family unit, as well as the ongoing turmoil stifling Afghanistan's development. In this section of the novel Amir recovers his potential as a storyteller, and Hosseini brings us full-circle to the creation of *The Kite Runner'*s metafictional structure: Amir commits his coming-of-age story—recognised as allegorical by Jefferess (2009, 394) and other critics—to narrative form, representing Afghanistan's return to agency.

The Kite Runner emerged in the post-9/11 period as a novel that challenged the rhetoric legitimising the invasion of Afghanistan. As described in the introduction to this thesis, the attacks of 11 September 2001 were framed as an instance of collective trauma for a Western world—and specifically an American society—unused to such violence. Jenny Edkins describes "events of 9/11" as having "exposed the contingency of everyday life" (2003, 227). Further, "the intrusion of the real of death and devastation into New York on a sunny September morning was a brutal reminder that all security is a fantasy" (Edkins 2003, 227). Efforts to reinstate state authority and to lessen feelings of powerlessness were immediate in the aftermath of the attacks and were seen particularly in the language of remembrance and the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' (Edkins 2003, 228). The resultant conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq represent the culmination of this rhetoric and were integral to efforts at reclaiming authority in the aftermath of 9/11.

In the wake of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, news media became an important force in the cultivation of cultural memory frames perpetuating this dehumanisation of populations

in Afghanistan and Iraq and aimed at the re-constitution of sovereign authority in Western states, specifically America. As described in the introduction to this thesis, the discourse of the 'war on terror' is underpinned by cultural memory that could justify, and be amenable to, the use of military force against those designated as the enemy. In *Trauma Fiction* Anne Whitehead argues that "collective memory is imbricated in political structures and produces narratives which are used to support group interests and mobilise loyalties" (2004, 43). In other words, once an idea or a particular understanding of events has taken root within a culture or society via framing and repetition, it can then be called upon to legitimise or justify responses that include war.

In entering into this discourse and explicitly attempting to "put a human face" on his "homeland", Hosseini rails against one-dimensional framings of Afghanistan that rendered it synonymous with the Taliban or al-Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks (2013, III). In combating this framing, Hosseini might be seen to take on the mantle of the national writer, a spokesperson of sorts for Afghanistan in the West. In *The World Republic of Letters* Pascale Casanova writes about the preponderance of national writers among those representing the "periphery" in world literature; she argues that peripheral writers, deprived of an "autonomous" literary legacy, are reduced to the role they play in furthering a national political cause, whether they embrace such a task or reject its burdens (2004, 41). Meanwhile, sociologist Sarah M. Corse notes that "national literatures had traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation" (1997, 1). Within this conceptualisation of national literatures, national writers are tasked with ascertaining the dominant traits, values and cultural norms of their respective nations for canonical representation where such a canon is considered essential to the representation of national identity. However, Corse challenges this understanding of the role of national literatures as simplistic, noting that such canons are more often involved in the formation and maintenance

of collective identities (1997, 3). Corse succinctly argues that “the pairing of literature and the nation is in fact a social construction that performs powerful and important cultural work” (2012, 3).

In this sense, Hosseini’s project in *The Kite Runner*, as articulated by the author himself, does appear to fall within the remit of the national novelist. However, to categorise Hosseini as a national author in the style described by Casanova or Corse is perhaps simplistic or reductive given Hosseini’s determination not simply to reflect or participate in the cultivation of a national character but to locate Afghanistan in a transnational context as a nation long shaped by its interaction with other spaces. *The Kite Runner* opens in December 2001 with an adult Amir casting his memory back to a day the previous summer when a family friend, Rahim Khan, called from Pakistan. Hosseini refers to landmarks like Golden Gate Park and Spreckels Lake to clearly situate the narrative in San Francisco (2003, 1). Conspicuously, the time of writing is noted as December 2001, but no reference is made to the context of the post-9/11 period, unavoidably evoked by the date and location. The significance of this temporal setting is instead allowed to linger over the opening of the narrative, charging it with expectation as Amir remembers his childhood in Kabul—a city under invasion by US troops in December 2001—and something that occurred in a “deserted alley” in 1975 that has shaped his life, an incident that we later discover was Hassan’s rape (Hosseini 2003, 1). In this way, Hosseini maps a connection between Kabul in 1975 and America in the post-9/11 period, implicitly linking these spaces for the reader. The narrative that we are about to experience, this opening suggests, will explicate the relationship between these times and these places, offering an understanding of the ways in which they are linked. Similarly, Amir is presented as someone shaped by his experience in Kabul but who now considers San Francisco “home”, a product of transnational movement (Hosseini 2003, 2).

Importantly, Hosseini's declared interest in the national frame does not undermine the project of tracing Afghanistan's transnational relations. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the nation remains an important framework within transnational systems. Jie-Hyun Lim argues that the "most frequent misunderstanding of nationalism is that nationalism is national" (2010, 138). As such, Hosseini's attention to the national does not preclude his consideration as a transnational author; his attempts to depict Afghanistan, even as he fixates on the national context, are automatically imbricated in transnational, global political discourse. This reality is borne out in Hosseini's case when we consider the proven transnational appeal of his work, with *The Kite Runner* and Hosseini's follow-up novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), selling over 38 million copies worldwide, 10 million in the United States alone (Book Facts). Much like Amir, Hosseini was born in Afghanistan during a period of relative stability only to find himself—the son of a UN diplomat—seeking political asylum in the United States by 1980 as his native country was thrown into turmoil during the Soviet-Afghan war. Like Amir, Hosseini has spent most of his life in America since arriving as a refugee. Hosseini trained and worked as a physician before he found success as a novelist, his first novel, *The Kite Runner,* taking on the task of depicting Afghanistan at a moment when it had found rather one-dimensional representation in Western discourse as a war-torn land dominated by terrorist organisations.

This chapter argues that Hosseini adopts a bildungsroman form as he traces Amir's journey to realise his ambition as a novelist. In this sense, the structure of *The Kite Runner* mimics that of a performative metafiction, as we are privy to the events of the novel as they come to us via the narrative voice of a novelist detailing his journey toward being able to tell this very story. Through the relationship between Amir and his father, Hosseini covers issues such as religion and alcohol, presenting a pluralistic, cosmopolitan 1970s Kabul at ease with its transnationalism. I argue that—though, as we will discover, Hosseini's conscious

transnationalism is in some ways problematic—the bildungsroman form creates narrative space at the beginning of the novel for the imagination of Afghanistan as a complex nation with a history comprised of more than its tragedies: we are given a glimpse of a 'before'.

On another textual level, however, this metafictional retelling of Amir's bildungsroman, once complete, can be read as an allegorical representation of Afghanistan as a nation struggling to assert agency and achieve self-advocacy within the international community. While several critics have addressed the allegorical aspects of *The Kite Runner* (Jefferess 2009; Banita 2012), I examine Hosseini's depiction of Afghanistan's history of conflict as writing-back to limited post-9/11 memory frames, looking specifically at the ways in which his treatment of this suffering and prolonged national upheaval bears out current criticism of trauma theory in Western scholarship as limited in scope. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, in "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory in the global age" Stef Craps argues that definitions of trauma in the West are overly focused on the individual and neglect the types of ongoing trauma common to conflict zones (2014, 50). In *The Kite Runner,* the introduction of Afghanistan's more turbulent period sees its translation into what Craps maintains is a particularly Western-orientated understanding of trauma: that belonging to the individual and stemming from a singular instance of devastating rupture (2014, 50). This moment of individual trauma arises as Hassan's sexual assault, at the hands of local bullies, causes a traumatic break in his and Amir's young lives. Neither Hassan nor Amir are able to come to terms with the assault and their relationship deteriorates under the strain of that which trauma has rendered an incommunicable secret.

The lingering, relentless impact of this trauma eventually engenders the breakdown of Amir's family unit and Hassan's exile; this collapse reverberates through the remainder of *The Kite Runner* as the progress of Amir's bildungsroman is indefinitely stalled and he is forced to continually reckon with this singular moment of devastating traumatic fracture.

Following his emigration to San Francisco during the Soviet-Afghan war, Amir finds middling success as a novelist but expresses little pride in his work and remains unable to articulate his own suffering. This moment of crisis in Amir's coming-of-age story represents on a metafictional level the narrative complication which has made necessary this journey back toward storytelling. The resultant text, experienced by the reader as *The Kite Runner,* traces Amir's story as he deals with the long-term effects of his trauma before rendering it in narrative form so that it might be witnessed, though Amir's decision to write a novel is never articulated.

I argue that the translation of Afghanistan's complex recent history into this instance of individual trauma and its aftereffects, while perhaps effective in communicating the depth of suffering experienced in Afghanistan, is problematic in several ways. In its effort to present a trauma recognisable to a Western audience the novel simplifies the nature of the suffering incurred; as we will see, *The Kite Runner* features little detail on those groups—both within Afghanistan and the international community—who bear responsibility for Afghanistan's destabilisation. Additionally, Hosseini focuses on the psychological trauma felt by Amir, a privileged upper-middle-class Pashtun, as opposed to the physical and emotional trauma endured by Hassan, an illiterate servant whose love for Amir is simple and true. While this focus on Amir's pain to the exclusion of Hassan's offers a certain narrative verisimilitude in reflecting the disproportionate impact of conflict upon the Hazara group in Afghanistan, Hosseini ultimately fails to adequately challenge these dynamics and veers toward their reproduction. Finally, in the closing stages of the narrative, Hosseini depicts Amir's brief return to Afghanistan where he confronts and recovers from his childhood trauma and subsequently, Hosseini implies, finds a renewal of his abilities as a storyteller while living, significantly, in San Francisco. Read as allegory, this represents Afghanistan's rejection of its destructive elements and a return to agency on the world stage. I argue that

while this ending offers an optimistic rendering of an Afghanistan finding global representation through writers like Hosseini and his narrative proxy in Amir, it nevertheless encourages a cathartic, touristic engagement on the part of the reader with Afghan suffering, presenting the removal of the Taliban as a conclusion to Afghanistan's decades of conflict and ignoring the renewed conflict engendered by the invasion of US forces in October 2001.

Bildungsroman

In the years since *The Kite Runner's* 2003 publication, the novel has incurred significant criticism for its attempts to transcend "the locality of its setting to provide a universal and, ultimately, comfortingly familiar narrative" (Jefferess 2009, 389). The "comfortingly familiar narrative" takes the form of the bildungsroman which Hosseini employs to trace Amir's development. As the bildungsroman proceeds we are introduced to a young Amir living in his boyhood home in the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. The performance of metafiction here dictates that Hosseini does not present Amir's youthful perspective via a straightforward first-person narrative voice; we are not privy to the events of the novel's alternate temporal space as though they are occurring in the present. Instead, Hosseini maintains a layer of textuality which sees Amir's childhood experiences filtered through the narrating perspective of his elder self as he engages in the project of communicating these events to a reading audience. As such, the interpretative distance afforded by the intervening decades is brought to bear on the narrative frame through which we witness the events of Amir's childhood. This explicit sense of distance and removal forces the reader to continually reckon with the location of both Hosseini and Amir, as author and narrator respectively, firmly in the West, thus highlighting further the transnational quality of the text.

As Amir recalls the circumstances of his youth and the experiences that shaped his development, his relationship with his father stands out as of singular importance. Baba is

presented within the narrative as representative of a particular part of Afghanistan's history: the period during King Zahir Shah's reign when Afghanistan enjoyed a prolonged period of prosperity and peace. Baba is aligned with this time in Afghan history and embodies the independence and progressivism by which this era is characterised in the narrative; he was born in "1933…the year King Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign" (Hosseini 2003, 23). Amir's interactions with this stalwart figure encapsulate the complex environment in which our protagonist is attempting to find his voice as a storyteller. Baba, as he is known throughout the narrative, is described in quite formidable terms. "Mr Hurricane," as he was nicknamed in his youth, "was a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair unruly as the man himself" with "hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree" (Hosseini 2003, 12). Baba functions within the narrative not just as a father to Amir, but as a community leader; most significantly he gains local recognition for building an orphanage, cementing his status as a father-figure within the community. Confronted with this towering figure of Afghan masculinity, Amir's most fervent wish as a child is to impress this man and grow in his affections. This desire is often thwarted by the apparently fundamental differences existing between father and son and Baba's inability to accept his son's introspective nature, Amir failing to live up to the son he "envisioned" (Hosseini 2003, 19).

Amir's struggle to overcome his father's disapproval and become a successful writer represents the novel's primary engagement with the bildungsroman form. Amir's efforts, and subsequent failures, to live up to his father's expectations create space within the narrative for 'speaking-back' wherein Hosseini can communicate significant aspects of Afghan culture to a primarily Western reading audience. For example, Baba attempts to share a love of soccer with Amir, who can muster only indifference, having not "inherited" a shred of Baba's "athletic talents" (Hosseini 2003, 19). We are told that Baba travelled to "Tehran for a month

to watch the World Cup" in 1970 when most of Afghanistan did not yet have access to television (Hosseini 2003, 19). Beyond highlighting Baba's relative wealth and privilege—a point to which we will return—his interest in what is perhaps the quintessential international sport demonstrates the extent to which Afghan society contained transnational influences in the 1970s. At the same time, however, Baba can be seen to indulge in interests that are more specific to Afghanistan, bringing Amir to a local Buzkashi match; watching as men on horseback compete to deposit an animal carcass in a goal, Amir is horrified by the violence of "Afghanistan's national pastime", crying "all the way back home", but the reader is provided with access to an Afghanistan that is diverse in its interests (Hosseini 2003, 20).

It is unusual, of course, for Afghans to be represented in depth in Western media, which tends to present one-dimensional caricatures of Muslim people and communities. Halim Rane argues that the exclusion of "more representative stories and images that provide a more complete picture" eventually creates "narrow, skewed perspectives" that hinder cross-cultural understanding (2014, 2). Hosseini attempts to counter such one-dimensional representation through nuanced treatments of Baba and Amir, both of whom are presented as sympathetic despite their frequently oppositional interests and perspectives. Hosseini's use of the bildungsroman narrative structure, even as it presents Baba as a flawed father who is "disgusted" by his son's sensitivity, provides insight into the breadth of his character; we are asked to view Baba as an individual neither Othered nor removed from the context of his Afghan heritage (Hosseini 2003, 20).

Critics such as Jefferess have dismissed Hosseini's characterisation of Afghan society as subscribing to a universalist approach;[1] however, in determining the accuracy of this

[1] More specifically, Jefferess argues that Hosseini's approach to Afghan culture reflects "current theories of cosmopolitan ethics" in which the people of "Afghanistan must conform to particular Western expectations of democracy, liberalism and multiculturalism" in order to be recognised as human (2009, 390).

charge—and to complicate its premise—it is worth briefly pausing over Hosseini's intentions, acknowledging that his goal is not to erase Afghan culture for the benefit of a Western reader, but to reflect an Afghan society that he recalls as truly cosmopolitan. Hosseini has remarked that the Afghanistan of his youth—the Afghanistan represented in the pages of *The Kite Runner—*was a peaceful place. When Hosseini, born in Kabul in 1965, left with his family for his father's diplomatic posting in Paris, he says

> Afghanistan was a country at peace with itself, with its neighbours. Kabul was a growing, thriving, cosmopolitan city. So it was a very, very different picture of Afghanistan than the one you would think of today if somebody said the word Afghanistan. So I feel very fortunate to have lived through the final few peaceful years of recent Afghan history. (*Radio Free Europe* 2012)

It is ostensibly this cosmopolitan, thriving Afghanistan that Hosseini consciously depicts in *The Kite Runner.* Amir, for example, recalls days spent at the local cinema with Hassan watching westerns starring John Wayne, an actor whom he is amazed to discover is American like the "friendly, long-haired men and women we always saw hanging around in Kabul, in their tattered, brightly coloured shirts" (Hosseini 2003, 25). Amir also recalls spending his money on Coca-Cola, a quintessential transnational brand and a further marker of a childhood spent in a globalised city (Hosseini 2003, 25).

While these elements of the text might be easily written off as pandering to a Western reader, as Sarah Brouillette argues in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, identifying "world-readability" within a text is the result of a conscious process of searching for universalised elements (2011, 81). Brouillette notes that we might just as easily seek to identify the "local-readability" of a given text, emphasising the ways in which it reflects local specificity (2011, 81). As such we might note that alongside the Coca-Cola Amir and Hassan also bought "rosewater ice-cream topped with crushed pistachios", a treat

common to the region (Hosseini 2003, 25). Similarly, while the boys enjoy summer days watching American-made westerns for entertainment, they spend winters preparing for the local kite fighting tournament, a popular pastime in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. In this way, to view Hosseini's project in *The Kite Runner* as a straightforward effort to depict a westernised Kabul is reductive and betrays a degree of bias in the lens through which the reader views the text.

However, these instances of attention to the local frame and the dangers of ignoring the "local-readability" of the text notwithstanding, the reader might be permitted ambivalence when assessing Hosseini's depiction of this pluralistic, globalised Kabul, given his stated goal of putting "a human face" on Afghanistan (2013, III). The difficulty lies not in Hosseini's remembrance of—and commitment to representing—a cosmopolitan Kabul but in the effect of focusing on these elements as foundational in Afghan society. As Georgiana Banita notes, Hosseini "recruits American popular culture as a friendly and familiar looking glass" that ultimately emphasises the "commonalities between the United States and far-flung cultures" (2012, 327). Whatever the intent in Hosseini's depiction of the Kabul of his own privileged childhood—and its undeniable value in refuting one-dimensional renderings of Afghanistan as a perennially war-torn, insular, and backward place—the cost of such a rendering in the post-9/11 era is the apparent prioritisation of those aspects of Afghan culture that appeal to Western norms and a shoring up of cultural imperialism.

Similarly, Hosseini's efforts to satisfy cross-cultural curiosity on the topics of religion and alcohol result in deference to the Western frame. Amir recalls for the reader an instance from his childhood where he questioned his father's tendency to drink alcohol. Amir had been informed by a teacher that "Islam considered drinking a terrible sin" and becomes concerned about his father's indulgence (Hosseini 2003, 15). Hosseini, through the retrospective filter of adult Amir, contextualises their conversation on the topic within a

Kabul in which drinking was “fairly common” (Hosseini 2003, 15). Through Amir, Hosseini explains that “no one gave you a public lashing for it”, in what is likely a direct reference to Western media frames determined in their representation of Muslim societies as irreversibly or inevitably oppressive (Hosseini 2003, 15). Amir notes that “those who drank did so in private, out of respect” for the culture of which they were a part (Hosseini 2003, 15); those who chose to indulge “bought their scotch as ‘medicine’ in brown paper bags from selected ‘pharmacies’” and would “leave with the bag tucked out of sight,” sometimes “drawing furtive, disapproving glances from those who knew about the store’s reputation for such transactions” (Hosseini 2003, 15-16). In normalising the consumption of alcohol and placing Baba among those who choose to drink, Hosseini succeeds in depicting an Afghan society diverse in its approach to the tenets of Islam. Crucially, however, this also functions to favourably align such behaviours with progressivism and Western sensibilities toward alcohol; those who do not partake are relegated to the background of the novel, described implicitly as a disapproving, puritanical and backward fringe.

In Hosseini’s depiction of Baba’s religious attitudes more broadly we find a complex mix of motivations, making it difficult to parse the implications of Baba’s secularised characterisation. Strikingly, Baba tells Amir that he will “never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots”, referring to the mullahs teaching Amir (Hosseini 2003, 16); Baba also laments the notion that Afghanistan might ever “[fall] into their hands” (Hosseini 2003, 16). Secularism, liberalism and moderate devotion to religious beliefs are not the sole remit of Western societies; Baba’s secularism is not antithetical to his representation as an ‘authentic’ Afghan person. Nevertheless, due to the context of the novel’s production post-9/11, we must credit the Western perspective with a level of influence on the narrative frame and acknowledge Baba’s ardent secularism as Hosseini’s attempt to shield our protagonists from accusations of fundamentalism or association with extremist organisations. Hosseini does

not, of course, suggest that cross-cultural understanding necessitates the denouncing of Islamic teachings that garner disapproval in the West. Baba is, after all, acknowledged as "an unusual Afghan father," a "liberal who lived by his own rules" and who "disregarded or embraced societal customs as he had seen fit" (Hosseini 2003, 165). However, as we have seen, the troubling ambiguity in Hosseini's writing arises not from what he opts to feature, but rather from that which he chooses to ignore. It is Baba, in all his liberal exceptionality, that Hosseini foregrounds for his reader as the embodiment of 1970s Afghan society, functionally excluding from representation segments of the population for whom religious devotion and abstinence from alcohol does feature in their Afghan identity.

Beyond this framing of high-profile issues like alcohol and religion, Hosseini provides insight into wealth inequality and ethnic conflict in Afghan society. Initially, this inequality is only gestured toward in Hosseini's description of Amir's and Hassan's respective living quarters. Amir, we are told, lives with his father in what was considered the "most beautiful house" in the wealthy Wazir Akbar Khan district (Hosseini 2003, 4). Decorated with marble floors, mosaic tiles, extravagant chandeliers and large mahogany tables designed for entertaining, Amir and Baba enjoyed a privileged lifestyle. Importantly, while Hosseini does not attempt to cast this degree of comfort as typical, there is little attention paid to the experiences of less fortunate citizens of Kabul; the realities of his privilege are only made obvious to Amir much later in the narrative when he returns to Afghanistan and is chastised by Farid, his guide, for never having known the "real Afghanistan" (Hosseini 2003, 215). This childhood of relative comfort perhaps contributes to the dominance of Western cultural artefacts in the narrative where the cosmopolitanism of 1970s Kabul, remembered by Hosseini and his narrative proxy in Amir, may well have been present but the preserve of wealthy, upper-class children.

While Hosseini neglects in this way the general wealth inequality in Afghan society during Amir's childhood, he does make limited narrative space for the discussion of ethnic conflict and its attendant inequities. In contrast to Amir's lavish home and its various comforts, Hassan's living quarters are modest. Finishing his description of Baba's property in the garden, Amir notes that "on the south end of the garden, in the shadows of a loquat tree, was the servant's home, a modest little mud hut where Hassan lived with his father" (Hosseini 2003, 5). It is in the juxtaposition between these two living arrangements that Hosseini provides the first hints of the internal divisions in Afghanistan that will blight the futures of both Hassan and Amir. Despite the closeness of their relationship, Amir recalls being in Hassan's home only a "handful of times" and admits limited awareness of the disparity in their respective standings in Afghan society (Hosseini 2003, 8).

Amir admits, in fact, to a general lack of knowledge about the history that informs this disparity: the long-standing oppression of Hassan's ethnic group, the Hazara. Amir knew only that they were "Mogul descendants and that they looked a little like Chinese people" (Hosseini 2003, 8). He was vaguely aware of the harassment Hassan suffered, noting that other children would refer to Hazaras as "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys" (Hosseini 2003, 9). Amir explains this ignorance, saying that "school textbooks rarely mentioned them and referred to them only in passing" (Hosseini 2003, 8). In this way, Hosseini depicts discrimination against the Hazara minority in Afghanistan as deeply ingrained, to the extent that Amir did not feel compelled to question the circumstances underpinning his master-servant relationship with Hassan; we might, therefore, read Hosseini's initial depiction of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan as a pointed critique of its normalisation, Amir's ignorance presented as deliberately unsettling.

Amir remembers stumbling accidentally upon an old history book belonging to his mother that shed light on Hassan's ethnic background. In this textbook he learns that his

ethnic grouping, the Pashtuns, had "persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras" and that they had "driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and stolen their women" (Hosseini 2003, 9). In searching for an explanation for this treatment, Amir discovers only that "Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims while Hazaras were Shi'a" (Hosseini 2003, 9). In describing Hassan's plight and offering this limited account of history, Hosseini gestures toward the depth of suffering endured by the Hazara community in Afghanistan.[2] According to Sarah Hucal writing for Al Jazeera, Hazaras account for 20% of the Afghan population, roughly 6 million people. They were sold as slaves "as recently as the 19th century" and endured targeted violence under the Taliban regime (Hucal 2016). Al Jazeera reports that the Taliban "declared war on the Hazara", with Maulawi Mohammed Hanif, a commander in the regime, asserting that "Hazaras are not Muslims, you can kill them", resulting in the Mazir-i-Sharif massacre of 1998, when thousands of Hazaras were executed. The Hazara were granted equal rights in the Afghan constitution in 2004, though systemic inequalities persist with Hazara communities in Bamiyan, for example, among Afghanistan's most deprived (Hucal 2016). Of course, this present-day oppression is beyond the scope of Hosseini's novel—published in 2003—though later sections of the novel grapple rather unsatisfactorily, as we will see, with the Taliban's targeted violence.

The representation of this ethnic division and its embodiment in Hassan and Amir might also be read as a further facet of Hosseini's allegorical representation of Afghanistan's national history. As Banita puts it, the relationship between the two boys can ultimately be read as capturing "the antagonisms and rivalries that divide Afghan society" (2012, 323). While the existence of a poor, illiterate ethnic minority—represented by Hassan—perhaps

[2] As Alla Ivanchikova notes, Hosseini's depiction of ethnic division in Afghanistan is limited to that between the Pashtun and the Hazara, excluding from representation the Uzbek and Tajik groups (2017a, 202). Ivanchikova proposes that Hosseini elides this complexity because it "would be too hard to explain to a Western audience" (2017a, 202).

diminishes the suitability of Amir's bildungsroman as national allegory in that his experience cannot be read as entirely representative, it also offers a sense of narrative verisimilitude, reflecting real-world dynamics where Amir's story is prioritised over that of his minority counterpart.

In capturing the various ways in which this inequality manifests between Hassan and Amir, Hosseini distils the chasm between the two boys and the ethnic division they represent to the imbalance in opportunity represented by Amir's burgeoning abilities as a storyteller and Hassan's illiteracy. For Amir, his preoccupation with books and storytelling is a point of contention in his relationship with his father, encapsulating his quiet, reserved temperament in contrast to Baba's more outgoing, masculine persona. Amir recalls overhearing Baba venting his frustrations that his son is "always buried in those books or shuffling around the house like he's lost in some dream" (Hosseini 2003, 20). Amir finds comfort in his abilities as a storyteller as well as the sense of superiority it affords him in his relationship with Hassan, describing days spent reading aloud passages of books and revelling unkindly in the privilege afforded by his Pashtun heritage. For instance, he recalls playing a "little trick on Hassan" whereby he "strayed from the written story" he was reading aloud and invented a replacement plot in the moment (Hosseini 2003, 28). In a similar instance, Amir cruelly mis-defines the word "imbecile" and tells Hassan that it means "intelligent", offering the sentence "Hassan is an imbecile" as an example of use (Hosseini 2003, 27). While Amir recognises his behaviour as unkind, he nonetheless basks in the sense of superiority it provides, demonstrating Amir's blithe acceptance of his power over Hassan and the sense of ingrained entitlement this indicates. Amir intuitively understands the importance of writing and the agency it can bestow as he realises that, to Hassan, "the words on the page were a scramble of codes, indecipherable, mysterious" (Hosseini 2003, 28); he could see that "words were secret doorways" to which the literate "held all the keys" (Hosseini 2003, 28).

In contrast to Amir's ability to communicate and express his feelings through writing, we have Hassan's total inability, in this early part of the narrative, to express himself through the same medium. This is an injustice that readers are, it seems, invited to abhor given Amir's off-putting cruelty and entitlement. However, Hosseini's implicit condemnation of social inequality is at times eclipsed by his focus on Amir's emotional development, a trend that persists throughout the narrative, as we will see. An early disappointment for Amir is his father's disinterest in his writing abilities. Amir describes to the reader the process of writing his "first short story" about a "man who found a magic cup and learned that if he wept into the cup, his tears turned to pearls", perhaps a metaphor emerging out of Amir's developing sense of the value in rendering in narrative form one's pain and suffering (Hosseini 2003, 29). In presenting the story to his father, Amir is met with "a thin smile that conveyed little more than feigned interest" (Hosseini 2003, 29). However, family friend Rahim Khan's indulgence "buoyed" Amir and cemented his determination to continue honing his skills despite his father's indifference (Hosseini 2003, 31). This moment in Amir's coming-of-age story represents a significant turning point. Amir discovers a talent, the pursuit of which will come to shape his adult life and how he views his role in society, and grows determined despite the fact that it does not impress his father. Amir's determination is particularly significant in this section of the novel as we witness his innate understanding of the possibilities offered by fiction before trauma silences his authorial voice. Importantly, Amir's sense of his own potential as a future national voice for Afghanistan—a role from which Hassan is excluded—though only allowed to flourish momentarily, occurs within the same historical moment as the coup of 1973 that toppled the monarchy and precipitated Afghanistan's descent into turmoil.

Amir describes for the reader the knowledge, retrospectively achieved, that this was the moment in which "suddenly Afghanistan changed forever" (Hosseini 2003, 32). Critics

like Alla Ivanchikova have remarked that Hosseini's depiction of 1970s Kabul is "overly sentimental" (2017a, 202). Ivanchikova argues that the city is described "as a tranquil paradise of the oriental variety through a rather extreme agglomeration of positively coded imagery" (2017a, 202). In particular, Ivanchikova notes Hosseini's focus on "blue skies, trees in blossom, the chirping of a fountain, chatter and laughter, music, calloused hands, tea and cake", creating the impression of a "city of social cohesion almost completely free of social antagonisms and conflict" (2017a, 202). While Ivanchikova's critique, perhaps accurately, captures Hosseini's tendency to idealise Afghanistan, we might also note the ways in which this idealisation serves to disrupt post-9/11 notions of Afghanistan as perennially war-torn space; Hosseini points to a time, pre-Cold War, where Afghanistan enjoyed decades of relative peace and prosperity, disrupting framing that pitted the United States against a barbarous, terrorist haven.

Through Amir's retrospective account we get instead insight into a moment of rupture; the beginning of change in Afghanistan is emphasised as a major instance of departure from longstanding norms, communicated through the shock of two young children encountering conflict for the first time. Amir reflects on the fact that the sounds of bombs and gunfire "were foreign sounds to us then" (Hosseini 2003, 34); he notes that "the generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sound of bombs and gunfire was not yet born" and laments the passing of a "way of life" that often is not given space in Western accounts of Afghanistan (Hosseini 2003, 34). Amir recalls "crouching outside" Baba's study the morning Kabul awoke to "find that the monarchy was a thing of the past" (Hosseini 2003, 34). While "the king, Zahir Shah, was away in Italy" his government was toppled in a "bloodless coup", paving the way for several years of shifting power and instability until the Soviet Union finally invaded in December 1979 (Hosseini 2003, 34).

Ultimately, and in ways that we will later consider as problematic, the particulars of Afghanistan's political upheaval go unremarked upon, percolating quietly in the background as Hosseini moves toward their allegorical representation in terms more easily identifiable to a Western reader. Rather than detailing the cultural trauma being unleashed, Hosseini provides a final glimpse into Afghan culture as it existed during the relative calm of Amir's childhood, just before it is subsumed by decades of ongoing personal trauma and conflict. The last moments of this youthful exuberance afforded by Amir's bildungsroman are spent participating in the annual kite-fighting competition in Kabul. Amir explains that "every winter, districts in Kabul held a kite-fighting tournament" and "if you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was the highlight of the season" (Hosseini 2003, 46). Amir describes the competition as a community event which encapsulated many of the traits that he recognised as representing Afghan character, namely a love for custom but an abhorrence for "rules" (Hosseini 2003, 48).

Amir was, according to his own estimation and that of his peers, a "very good" kite fighter who had come close to winning the competition on earlier occasions (Hosseini 2003, 52). This particular tournament had come to represent to Amir his last great hope for winning his father's approval; it was to be the singular most important moment of growth and accomplishment in Amir's coming-of-age story. As it transpired, however, the kite-fighting tournament was to represent a very different turning point in Amir's bildungsroman. With the hope of success firmly in mind, Amir prepared for the competition determined that he "wasn't going to fail Baba" (Hosseini 2003, 53). The cultural significance of the event is emphasised as Hosseini's narrator recalls the morning of the competition and the enthusiasm it inspired among the local population. Amir states that he "had never seen so many people on our street" and describes how the "rooftops were jammed with spectators reclining in lawn

chairs" drinking tea and listening to music as they prepared to enjoy the festivities (Hosseini 2003, 58).

With victory came the thrill of Baba's approval at last. Amir recalls for the reader "the single greatest moment" of his "twelve years of life" as he watched his father standing "on the edge" of their roof "pumping both of his fists" while "hollering and clapping" (Hosseini 2003, 63). Amir accepted congratulations from the hordes of onlookers and supporters while Hassan took off running to complete their victory by capturing the last fallen kite. This part of the competition was Hassan's particular talent; he was "the greatest kite runner" Amir "had ever seen" (Hosseini 2003, 49). Amir fondly describes it as being "downright eerie the way he always got to the spot the kite would land before the kite did, as if he had some sort of inner compass" (Hosseini 2003, 49). It is important to note here the revelation that it is not Amir but Hassan who is the titular character, the "kite runner". This is a construction that will render Hassan's marginalisation in the starkest possible terms as his trauma is eventually side-lined to make space for that of Amir, his absence from later sections seeming strange and disorientating while nevertheless failing to mitigate Hosseini's ultimate reproduction of Hassan's silence. Watching Hassan set off on his run, adult Amir, narrating from his place in the novel's metafictional structure, signals to the reading audience that a shift is about to occur, bringing to an end the youthful, innocent section of this allegorical coming-of-age story. Amir foreshadows Hassan's attack and subsequent trauma as he tells the reader that the next time he would see his friend "smile unabashedly" would be "twenty-six years later, in a faded Polaroid photograph" (Hosseini 2003, 63). With the introduction of the traumatic disruption to the central bildungsroman as Hassan is raped by local bullies, it is the trajectory of Amir's story that is positioned to reflect the turmoil in Afghanistan and allegorises its devastation for the reader.

Trauma

Amir's centrality in the narrative is reflected in the fact that it is from his perspective, and not the primary victim, Hassan, that we learn about Hassan's rape. Amir describes eventually finding himself in the entryway to an alley, peeking quietly around the corner to where Hassan is standing before Assef, a local bully, and his two friends. Hassan is facing-off against his attackers in a "defiant stance" with his "fists curled, legs slightly apart" (Hosseini 2003, 67). This moment of disruption and violence is importantly rooted in Afghanistan's long history of ethnic conflict and inequality. Assef, a Pashtun, brings his culturally ingrained hatred for the Hazaras to bear on his encounter with Hassan in the alley. His pride is wounded as Hassan refuses to hand over the kite and, undeterred, Assef resolves to violently assault and then rape Hassan so as to reassert his dominance and preserve his credibility. He dehumanises Hassan, referring to him as "it" and "just a Hazara" (Hosseini 2003, 71). This attempt to justify his actions indicates that Assef is motivated, to some extent, by an ingrained sense of superiority and ethnic hatred.

However, Assef is established within the narrative most forcefully as a bully whose desire to inflict suffering seeks legitimacy in no particular ideological framework. Later in the novel, he explains his decision to join the Taliban by acknowledging that while he "wasn't much of a religious type", the group gave him a platform to enact his longed-for ethnic cleansing of the Hazara (Hosseini 2003, 259); Assef's religious awakening is thus presented as insincere, a vehicle for an already sadistic individual to inflict chaos and misery. Assef's decision to rape Hassan is similarly grounded in an understanding of the emphasis on masculinity in Afghan culture; Assef shrewdly manipulates Afghan society's pervasive heteronormativity to feminise his victim and thereby inflict a form of violence he knows to be literally unspeakable in such a society. As Ivanchikova puts it, Hassan's body is "a feminised, penetrable body that connotes passivity, powerlessness and a silent acceptance of his fate"

(2017a, 202). The fact that Hassan's fate here is tied to his ethnic heritage as "just a Hazara" once again demonstrates Hosseini's efforts to acknowledge the oppression of the Hazara, an acknowledgement that is unfortunately undermined as Hassan's pain is subordinated, ultimately to Amir's regret (Hosseini 2003,71).

In his status as a Hazara, Hassan is merely an object of domination to Assef, a body to be colonised and made to submit to his will. Assef, in his willingness to exploit this power imbalance to inflict needless suffering, is established as both a product of Afghanistan's ingrained cultural divisions and an indiscriminately, arbitrarily violent individual who is mercenary in his allegiances. By the narrative's end he has been aligned to the factions leading the destabilising coup against the monarchy—as an early fan of Daoud Khan, the president ensconced by the 1973 coup against the monarchy—as well as to the Taliban, establishing Assef as an allegorical figure in his own right representing those elements that have haunted Afghanistan's troubled history. Jefferess notes that Assef is presented as "the archetype of the sinister and the cruel," a singular repository within the narrative for all that ails Afghanistan, challenging notions that Afghanistan's woes can be traced to religious extremism alone (2009, 392). Ultimately, however, the narrative's refusal to engage in more detail with the ideologically driven factions—foreign and domestic—in Afghan history and the reduction of these elements to a solitary disturbed individual represent a critical shortcoming of Hosseini's rendering of Afghanistan's tumultuous history—a shortcoming to which we will return.

Similarly, Hosseini's depiction of the trauma at the heart of *The Kite Runner* encounters difficulties related to representation and the potential for over-simplification. As already noted, Hosseini translates the ongoing disruption and conflict in Afghanistan into terms intelligible to a Western reader via the narrative frame of individual, personal trauma. As described in the introduction to this thesis, Craps, in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma*

Out of Bounds, has outlined the ways in which dominant conceptualisations of trauma in the West are not necessarily useful for understanding trauma occurring outside of the experiences common to a very narrow segment of the world's population. Invoking the work of Laura Brown ("Not Outside the Range"), Craps stresses that dominant models were cultivated based on the experiences of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (2012, 20) excluding trauma born of more systemic forms of oppression such as racism, sexism or colonial occupation (Craps 2012, 21). Specifically, Craps argues that the typically Western formulation of trauma as "an individual phenomenon" usually stemming from "a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" can be particularly challenging or "problematic" because it distracts from, or does not account for, those wider social factors that "enabled the traumatic abuse" (2014, 50). These factors include "economic domination or political oppression" or those issues pertaining to racism and "other forms of ongoing oppression" that are not encapsulated by Western conceptualisations of trauma (2014, 50).

Importantly, Craps argues that in addressing trauma of a more systemic or ongoing nature in terms dictated by Western formulations, "solidarity" is abandoned in favour of "the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities" (2014, 46). According to Craps, the "uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism" (2014, 48). This is a difficulty with which Hosseini contends in attempting to explain the nature of Afghanistan's cultural trauma to a Western audience. For Hosseini, the project of 'speaking-back' and disrupting post-9/11 memory frames that do not account for Afghanistan's history of trauma and conflict—often at the hands of Western powers—demands a certain consciousness of precisely who is being addressed. As Craps notes, if trauma theory—and trauma writing, by extension—is to "deliver on its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement and stay relevant in the globalised world of the twenty-first

century", then practitioners must contend with these various failings and incompatibilities (2012, 30). For Hosseini, this results not in a narrative that attempts to challenge or highlight the inadequacies of dominant Western models, but instead in a representation that side-steps these failings altogether. Hosseini does not directly describe the immense cultural upheaval suffered by Afghanistan in the late 1970s in terms dictated by Western trauma models; however, in allegorising this suffering through Hassan's rape Hosseini nonetheless capitulates to Western models and prioritises the empathetic engagement of a Western reader—or, more accurately, their comprehension of the horror approximated—over the detailed communication of Afghanistan's immensely complex history of conflict.

In describing Hassan's rape and the national trauma it represents, Hosseini uses the metafictional frame to position the reader at a degree of removal from the incident taking place in the alley. We are privy to Hassan's assault via Amir's recounting of his childhood memory. Amir's distance from the trauma, enacted both in the narrative frame and in the fact that it is not his bodily autonomy which is violated, speaks to his position of relative privilege in Afghan society as a wealthy, upper-class child and an ethnic Pashtun. Though Amir is affected by the chaos erupting in Afghanistan, he does not experience the same level of brutality as Hassan; the reader is thus consistently reminded of the numerous degrees of suffering presented here and the extent to which our narrator is prevented from fully engaging with the totality of trauma inflicted upon various factions of Afghan society.

As Amir describes his experience as witness to Hassan's assault, the allegorical filter of Western-conceptualised trauma is immediately employed so that Hosseini can begin to translate Afghanistan's turmoil. Amir describes feeling "paralysed" as Hassan is set upon by his attackers (Hosseini 2003, 69). He is unable to move forward to help Hassan but instead resorts to biting his fist and intermittently shutting his eyes (Hosseini 2003, 69). Amir's description of his response to what is occurring in the alley falls in line with Western

conceptualisations of individualised trauma defined by Craps as stemming from a "single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" (2014, 50). As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Cathy Caruth—a prominent trauma scholar and key architect of dominant models in cultural and literary theory—has defined trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (1996, 11). According to Caruth, interpreting Freud, traumatic experiences constitute those that happen "too soon" or "too unexpectedly" to be fully known to the individual as they occur (1996, 4).

Ultimately, Caruth argues that traumatic experiences constitute a "wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" and that the particulars of such events can only be made "available to consciousness" as the trauma "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (1996, 3-4). In Western scholarship on trauma the theory goes that a traumatic experience—characterised by flashbacks or other repetitive encounters with the traumatic event that cannot be integrated into narrative memory—can only be transmitted via fragmented, anti-narrative form.[3] Caruth suggests that literary fiction can utilise language in ways that mimic the disruptive effects of trauma and therefore aid the reading audience in coming to comprehend the severity of the trauma described (1996, 5); literature can employ a language that "defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (Caruth 1996, 5). In other words, even as the traumatic event is continually encoded by language and we bear witness to its passing, literature allows trauma to persist in resisting "simple comprehension" through "enigmatic testimony" (Caruth 1996, 6).

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead summarises Caruth's position regarding literary representation of trauma as the notion that literary fiction can "provide a narrative" through

[3] Caruth's writing on "belatedness" or the delayed confrontation with trauma that is not experienced as it occurs—while commonly cited as a typical trait of trauma within dominant Western models—has been the subject of recent criticism. See pp. 32-34. The literality of flashbacks, the result of an inability to assimilate trauma into narrative memory, as described by Caruth and van der Kolk (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 1995), has been declared by numerous critics to be without sufficient evidence (Gibbs 2014, 14).

which to witness trauma that "is not straightforwardly referential" but "which nevertheless offers a powerful mode of access" (2004, 13). According to Whitehead, Caruth ultimately posits that the narrative representation of trauma in fiction requires a "literary formulation which departs from conventional linear" structures (2004, 6). For Craps, and as noted in the introduction to this thesis, this dedication to mimicking trauma's disruptive capacity and its supposed unrepresentability—a dedication to "modernist textual strategies"—is further indicative of the Eurocentric approach to Western trauma writing and theory (2014, 50).[4] Craps remarks upon the exclusivity of such writing—and thinking—about trauma where modernism is primarily a "European cultural tradition" (2014, 50); Craps suggests that trauma theory would be better served by an openness to literary representation that can capture a broader array of traumatic experiences, making space for those traumas not characterised by singular instances of disruption (2014, 51). Craps remarks that rather than

> positing a necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite and necessitate. (2014, 51)

It is, however, this mode of modernist textual strategy that Hosseini adopts in rendering Hassan's rape for the reading audience, sticking closely to recognisable Western models of trauma. As Hassan is set upon by his attackers in the initial assault, Amir's narrative perspective destabilises and shifts intermittently away from what is happening in the alley. The narrative is interrupted by memories and remembrances of dreams which

[4] As noted in the introduction to this thesis, this reliance on experimental, fragmented narratives in literary trauma theory is owing to dominant formulations of trauma (Caruth 1995;1996) that insist on trauma as involving severe psychic shock that defies integration into narrative memory and therefore cannot be represented.

spring unprompted into the path of the reader and momentarily derail the narrative. This is a rare instance of upset in a novel that is otherwise structurally linear. As Ivanchikova notes, the "act of rape Amir witnesses scrambles the narrative flow causing it to become fragmented" so that "the scene is recounted through a mix of flashbacks and disjointed associations" (2017a, 202). In this way, the enormity of what is witnessed is made clear; as Ivanchikova puts it, the "efficacy" of the "image of rape" in *The Kite Runner* "lies in its visceral nature" (2017a, 202). Read at the level of allegory, we grasp the extent of the national upheaval occurring if not the specifics of the situation unfolding.

As the flashbacks proceed, it is not clear to the reader whether the memories intrude into the consciousness of our adult, narrating Amir or into that of his younger self. Whether the original escape into the realm of memory belongs to twelve-year-old Amir or his adult counterpart, it represents the moment at which Hosseini's protagonist is forced to confront a horror so immense that, as Caruthian readings of trauma would have it, he is unable to effectively process its enormity and so does not have access to its details. Amir's memories are presented to the reader in italics so as to clearly distinguish between that which is occurring in the narrative's immediate temporal space and that which we are experiencing as a breakdown in Amir's ability to effectively communicate events to the reader. These interjections into the linear narrative are utilised by Hosseini to both strengthen the reader's perception of the bond which existed between Amir and Hassan and to emphasise the enormity of the trauma. The first memory recounted here flashes back to Amir's recollection of being told as a child that he and Hassan were "fed from the same breast" (Hosseini 2003, 69). The memory does not designate a speaker or provide any context for the relation of this information; the notion that "there is a brotherhood between people who have fed from the same breast" is simply allowed to stand within the narrative as an added moment of insight into the horror Amir experiences as he watches Hassan's assault (Hosseini 2003, 69).

The next memory appearing unbidden within Hosseini's narrative finds Amir and Hassan visiting a fortune-teller who promises to "part the curtain of truth" for "one rupia each" (Hosseini 2003, 69). We are told that as the fortune-teller allows the "calloused pads of his fingers brush against Hassan's eyes" he stops and a "shadow passes across" his face (Hosseini 2003, 70). The old man, having seen something troubling, refunds Hassan's contribution and turns his attention toward Amir. We are given to understand here that Amir's inability to process the scene unfolding before him in the alley forces him to seek explanation beyond the realm of what is logical or sensible. This conjuring of a memory that suggests Hassan's assault might have been fated and predicted by the fortune-teller indicates Amir's attempts to reconcile this traumatic experience with the carefree lives they had led. It suggests that Hassan's assault was inevitable and as such a natural development which does not necessarily have to be dealt with as a moment of rupture. However, the fortune-teller's reaction to Hassan's future is also notable in the way it validates the sense of horror surrounding the trauma that unfolds. As such, this recourse to the realm of the fantastical is necessary, even if ultimately fruitless, for Amir as his mind reels under the pressure of that which he cannot process.

The narrative eventually shifts back to Amir's view of the alley where Hassan's assault is ongoing. The reader is once again placed in the role of witness as our attention returns to the alley and we are brought up to speed with what has happened while the ability of the narrator to relate events was momentarily disrupted by the impact of trauma. The brutality of the intervening moments is not filled in for the reading audience. Instead, much as the nature of dominant Western trauma models would dictate, these moments are effectively lost to Amir and the reading audience to which he testifies. Amir describes the peripheral details of the scene as we are returned to the moment, focusing his attention on the trivialities initially before turning to deal with Hassan's presence at the traumatic epicentre of

this ordeal. Amir states that “a havoc of scrap and rubble littered the alley” (Hosseini 2003, 70). Among the rubbish were insignificant items such as “worn bicycle tyres, bottles with peeled labels, ripped up magazines [and] yellowed newspapers”, all abandoned “amid a pile of bricks and slabs of cement” (Hosseini 2003, 70). Though the description of these items suggests quite a grim setting, there are two items that emerge as especially troubling to both Amir and the reading audience: “the blue kite resting against the wall” and “Hassan’s brown corduroy pants thrown on a heap of eroded bricks” (Hosseini 2003, 70). As our attention is drawn to these items it becomes clear that the assault has taken a decidedly more disturbing turn during Amir’s moment of traumatic detachment.

Amir describes Hassan lying helpless “with his chest pinned to the ground” and his arms “twisted and bent at the elbow” so that his “hands were pressed to his back” (Hosseini 2003, 71). Assef, leading the charge, is standing with the “heel of his snow boots crushing the back of Hassan’s neck” (Hosseini 2003, 71). Amir describes seeing Hassan’s face briefly immediately before Assef carries out his sexual assault. According to Amir, the look he witnessed there was one of “resignation” as Hassan hopelessly submits to his fate (Hosseini 2003, 72). The recognition of this look is enough to bring to Amir’s mind a similar expression of resignation he witnessed on the face of a sheep one Eid as the mullah cut its throat in Baba’s garden. The horror of the recounted memory, with the violence it entails, serves two purposes within the narrative. First, it allows Hassan’s trauma to be rendered via a conduit experience, communicating its devastation without forcing its articulation. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, as Amir instinctually relates Hassan’s experience to that of a sheep or sacrificial lamb, the reader is able to discern the extent to which Afghanistan’s violent history has disproportionately affected ethnic minorities. This latter impression is emphasised as Amir recalls that he “stopped watching” and “turned away from the alley”, unable to continue in his role as witness (Hosseini 2003, 72). Adult Amir, narrating from the

comfort of the present, admits to a number of reasons for turning his back on Hassan. Among these reasons, at least those consciously recognised, were cowardice and fear but also uglier thoughts about Hassan perhaps being the "price" he had to pay for Baba's affection and the progression of his bildungsroman (Hosseini 2003, 73). Amir echoes the words of Hassan's attackers as he refers to him as "just a Hazara" and therefore dispensable as collateral damage (Hosseini 2003, 73).

The significance of these uncomfortable admissions becomes clearer when contextualised within the allegorical representation of Afghanistan enacted by Amir's metafictional coming-of-age story. Whitehead refers to the type of phenomenon represented in Amir's response to trauma here as a "splitting or rupture of the self" whereby the protagonist experiences a moment of "dissociation" from the traumatic situation (2004, 36). Noting a similar phenomenon in Benjamin Wilkomirski's controversial *Fragments,* Whitehead argues that this break from reality, when represented in children, is often denoted by some form of involuntary physical response such as "deafness," paralysis or an inability to speak (2004, 36). According to Whitehead this narrative device is used to communicate a "lack of agency" in the child experiencing trauma (2004, 36); they are unable to intervene or prevent what is occurring and so this manifests as a literal impediment to action in the form of speech (Whitehead 2004, 36). As Ivanchikova puts it, the disruption is such that "perception becomes fragmentary, erratic, and the senses themselves unreliable" (2017a, 202). Amir views his apparent cowardice in this moment as him being complicit in Hassan's rape, an allegorical nod to the ways in which Afghanistan is presumed in the West to be an inherently chaotic place whose people have participated in their own destruction. However, the reading audience, while disappointed by Amir's inaction and perhaps horrified by his justifications, does not necessarily experience his childlike response in the same way. From our removed perspective, we are able to recognise his likely inability to save Hassan as

unfortunate, even tragic, but not as an active cause of the rape. There is instead the suggestion of a deeply ingrained indifference for the plight of his perceived social inferior which manifests, seemingly inevitably, in the selfish behaviour of our twelve-year-old protagonist. Nevertheless, Amir becomes determined at this point in the narrative to castigate himself for his inaction and place himself within the same category of guilt as those directly responsible. This guilt and inability to 'work through' the trauma permeates Amir's existence and stalls the progression of his bildungsroman indefinitely.

Importantly, Hosseini persists with his use of Western-conceived trauma as allegorical filter as the trauma continues to manifest as individually experienced, unspeakable and beyond the remit of language. Amir's status as allegory for his native country is cemented as he is effectively set up here—unable to articulate his experience to his father or in his writing—to mirror Afghanistan as it undergoes a moment of major upheaval and subsequent loss of agency and ability to self-advocate on the world stage. Hassan's exclusion from literary self-expression, before and after his rape, precludes him from such a role, a dynamic that is, as we will see, insufficiently interrogated by Hosseini. Ultimately, Hosseini problematises Amir's child-like fixation on his own guilt and positions him as an unreliable narrator in this regard; later in the narrative we hear from Rahim Khan that Amir was always "too hard on" himself, a nod from a reliable, adult narrative presence that Amir's conscience was unduly weighted, simultaneously challenging framings that imply Afghanistan bears responsibility for its turbulent history that is the result of colonial intervention by world powers (Hosseini 2003, 276). The novel's preoccupation with the theme of redemption is thereby refocused to deal more precisely with the project of 'working through' trauma toward recovery so that agency and the capacity to speak back can be reclaimed on both narrative levels. This focus on recovery will be examined as problematically trained on the individual later in this chapter. However, it suffices for the moment to note the ways in which, by

implicitly absolving Amir of his burden in order to make the point that Afghanistan need not seek redemption on the world stage for its history—a worthwhile point, certainly—Hosseini avoids dealing with the full extent of the ethnic discrimination and violence demonstrated here.

As Amir's narration returns to the alley Hassan's trauma is dealt with only in passing. Amir admits to feigning ignorance regarding his friend's ordeal, settling instead for a half-hearted inquiry as to Hassan's whereabouts since they were last together. As noted, the narrative at no point turns to Hassan's point of view during the rape, and the reader never receives a sense of his physical or psychological trauma. Amir admits to steadfastly ignoring the tears on his friend's face, the "crack in his voice" or "those drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black" (Hosseini 2003, 74). Hassan, for his part, neither volunteers to recount his assault nor makes any reference to Amir's obvious determination to ignore that something terrible has taken place in his supposed absence. Hassan displays typical signs of trauma as he finds himself momentarily unable to speak or to find language to reorient himself within his surroundings. Amir recalls that "Hassan began to say something and his voice cracked" (Hosseini 2003, 74). He then "closed his mouth, opened it and closed it again" (Hosseini 2003, 74). Since Hassan was making no progress in his attempts to articulate his traumatic experience, he eventually gave up, "took a step back" and "wiped his face" (Hosseini 2003, 74). Amir remembers this as the closest he and Hassan "ever came to discussing what had happened in the alley" (Hosseini 2003, 74).

Hassan's role as a servant means that must carry on with his duties despite the immensity of the trauma he has suffered; as an illiterate member of an ethnic minority, Hassan does not possess a platform from which to enact the witnessing of his trauma or to disrupt the status quo by calling attention to his own needs and experiences. Amir recalls that "for a week" he "barely saw Hassan" as he would do his chores and then "crawl under his

blanket" to sleep (Hosseini 2003, 76). Hassan eventually re-emerges reluctant to address the impact of the assault; he appears to be aware of his powerlessness and the futility of dwelling on his trauma. Ultimately, both boys are rendered unable to articulate their experience due to the trauma it engendered. Even adult Amir, narrating from his place in the present, is unable to name Hassan's assault as rape. Instead, he consistently refers to it vaguely as something that "happened in the alley" (Hosseini 2003, 74). This incident is traumatic not simply because of the emotional or physical injury it inflicts, but the shift it represents in their young lives. From this point onward, the trauma exists as something unspeakable between Amir and Hassan, breaking down their previously easy relationship into one made up of fraught, tense interactions until its final collapse.

Hosseini presents this breakdown as an allegory for Afghanistan's descent into turmoil and silence in the latter half of the 20th century. Once set in motion by the coup in 1973, there is no end to the conflict that descends upon the Afghanistan of Amir's youth. Unable to cope with or 'work through' the trauma, Amir begins to turn his back on Hassan and the progression of his bildungsroman is indefinitely halted. This crisis, both within the metafictional development of Amir's bildungsroman and the allegorical representation of Afghanistan's national turmoil, is embedded in the structure of the novel as narrative attention is pulled away from Afghanistan and Amir leaps forward a number of years to his and Baba's emigration to California.

Emigration to America

With the realisation that irreparable damage has been done to his relationship with Hassan, Amir resigns himself to bringing an end to their current familial set-up. Amir plants a new watch and money received as birthday presents under Hassan's mattress and tells his father that these items had been stolen. Hassan, ever loyal to Amir, accepts the blame and leaves the house with Ali close behind him. Hassan's exit marks the last incident recounted in

detail from Amir's childhood. The narrative leaps forward to March 1981 as Amir and Baba flee Afghanistan and the latest turmoil engulfing Kabul. The collapse of Amir's family unit, as evidenced by just the presence of Baba with him on the journey, mirrors the collapse of Afghanistan's last remaining shreds of stability as the ongoing conflict escalates. As Naeem Inayatullah notes, Hosseini does not address American involvement in this turmoil, ignoring "the Cold War competition with the USSR that turned Afghanistan into a *rentier* client state" and "severing the West from its role in the destruction of Afghanistan" so that it can later on be depicted as a haven for Amir (2013, 334, emphasis in original). As Ivanchikova similarly argues, where international responsibility for Afghanistan's woes is meted out it is directed only at the Soviet Union, who has invaded Afghanistan during the narrative interlude; the "spectacular destruction is blamed on the Soviets", while "Hosseini conveniently ignores all mention of the CIA-trained Mujahideen" (2017a, 205). In this way, while Hosseini's use of individual trauma as allegory communicates a visceral impression of suffering, this does not capture the complexity of the conflict and ultimately does little to disrupt cultural memory frames that elide the role of the West in Afghanistan.

Significantly, it is a Soviet soldier that Baba bravely challenges in the back of a crowded transport van while attempting to escape to Pakistan with Amir. The soldier, a stand-in for the ills of the Soviet regime in general, demands "a half hour" with one of the female passengers "in the back of the truck" (Hosseini 2003, 106). Baba defiantly declares that he would gladly "take a thousand bullets before" allowing this "indecency take place" (Hosseini 2003, 107). Baba's bravery against the depravity of the soldier spurs Amir to reflect on his own failings as his consciousness is overtaken by the recollection of Hassan's assault. We are told that his "mind flashed to that winter day six years ago" (Hosseini 2003, 107). He flashes back to "peering around the corner in the alley" while watching "Kamal and Wali holding Hassan" and wonders whether he is "really Baba's son" (Hosseini 2003, 107).

This recollection is designed to demonstrate for the reader that the trauma experienced by Amir earlier in the narrative has not been dispensed with and has instead proved a lingering hindrance—the ongoing disturbance and conflict embodied now in the destructive presence of the Soviet army—to his development.

By contrast, however, the impact of this trauma on Hassan is not explored any further; his exit from Baba's house marks Hosseini's final engagement with how Hassan is affected by his rape. The narrative leaves Hassan behind as it opts to focus on the wealthy Pashtun boy and trace his ascendancy to the role of national advocate. This represents, I suggest, the turning point in Hosseini's representation of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan. Once Hassan is exiled in this way and is now totally without representation, Hosseini's narrative rendering of his suffering can no longer be waved off as a naïve attempt at verisimilitude. Hassan's absence and lack of narrative voice, however realistic, ultimately amounts here to a reproduction of his marginalisation; Hassan is reduced to a ghost whose tragic life haunts Amir, and it is Amir's hauntedness with which we are concerned. This conclusively renders the allegorical representation of Afghanistan's turmoil through the rape of an already subjugated and voiceless citizen an exploitative exercise where the focus is thereafter trained on the pain of his upper-class counterpart as allegory for the nation at large.

As a result of the developmental stagnation that is the result of trauma, escaping the setting of his suffering does not mark the turning point in the bildungsroman structure that the reader might expect. Though Amir views his emigration as a new start and America as a place with "no ghosts, no memories, and no sins", he remains incapable on a fundamental level of leaving his past behind (Hosseini 2003, 126). In fleeing Afghanistan, Amir does not reach the pinnacle of his bildungsroman nor does he manage to cultivate a life removed from the shadow of trauma. Amir completes his second-level education and pursues writing at university, eventually finding work as a novelist. During this period he also marries Soraya

and mourns the death of his father. However, a sense of unease haunts this section of the novel as Amir's life in America never quite grants him contentment or the escape he seeks. Each featured character seems to exist in a state of purgatory as they attempt to reconcile with their new surroundings. For Baba, America proves largely disorientating and disappointing, leading Amir to comment that while his father "loved the idea of America" actually living there "gave him an ulcer" (Hosseini 2003, 116). Baba dies without ever really adjusting to life in the West and remaining steadfast in his observance of Afghan customs. In this sense, we might read Baba's ailing health and eventual death, where it symbolises non-assimilation into American culture, as yet another problematic comment on the necessity of conforming to Western—or, more specifically, American—cultural norms. A similar maladjustment can be recognised in Soraya's father, an army general, determined that one day "Afghanistan would be freed", the "monarchy restored" and his "services would once again be called upon" (Hosseini 2003, 162).

Amir and Soraya's discontentment in America is less explicit due largely to their relative youth and the ease with which they assimilate into everyday aspects of Western culture. However, their inability to conceive a child casts a considerable shadow over their happiness. Amir alludes to the notion that their unexplained infertility is perhaps a form of retribution for his past and having children was "meant not to be" (Hosseini 2003, 173). He comments that, though their lives were otherwise comfortable and satisfying, Soraya's inability to conceive could sometimes be felt "settling between" them and undermining their happiness (Hosseini 2003, 173). Similarly, Amir's career as a novelist seems to fall short of providing genuine fulfilment. Once his success in the field has been established, we hear little of his output and few details about the subject matter of his novels. Indeed, while Amir seems to have achieved his boyhood goals, any reader satisfaction at his apparent success is roundly undercut by the sense of hollow achievement and foreboding which Amir experiences in

America. Amir becomes a novelist, and yet he remains unable to utilise language to articulate and excise the trauma haunting his existence. Hassan's rape, and the national upheaval it symbolises, is still unwitnessed at this point in the narrative, as our resident storyteller remains subject to the limiting powers of his own trauma. On the level of allegory, the reader bears witness to Afghanistan's prolonged marginalisation in the wake of conflict as its ongoing turmoil is relegated to the periphery of the novel.

Witnessing and Return to Agency

Amir's bildungsroman remains stalled in this way until his return to Afghanistan at Rahim Khan's request. This section of the novel addresses the ways in which Afghanistan has been misunderstood or denied grievability on the world stage during a period when ongoing turmoil and trauma precipitated its marginalisation within the international community. Rahim Khan summons Amir to Pakistan with the cryptic promise that "there is a way to be good again", confirming his knowledge of Amir's past transgression (Hosseini 2003, 177). In order to attain that which he understands as redemption, Amir must go to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's son, now understood to be his own nephew, from an orphanage.

Amir's role as cultural interpreter is further complicated in this section of the narrative. Amir's time spent in the West during Afghanistan's most tumultuous period is framed within the narrative as having significantly reduced his credibility as an expert narrator. Amir's earlier characterisations of Afghanistan, though removed by decades and told from the West, were at least based on the first-hand experience of a childhood spent in Kabul. Upon his return to Pakistan and then Afghanistan, Hosseini seems to suggest that adult Amir is no longer entitled to occupy this expert space when describing what has befallen the region in the intervening decades. The distance ostensibly engendered by this prolonged removal seems to compel Hosseini to consciously reposition Amir in the role of

transcultural translator and deliberately foreground a sense of removal fostered by his time in the West.

In particular, Hosseini confronts the challenges attendant to witnessing trauma that transpired in Amir's absence and which he did not experience. Amir is effectively side-lined and placed as a witness to the suffering he escaped, his own displacement notwithstanding. The de-centring of Amir's perspective thus foregrounds the problematic aspects of reading of his narrative arc as symbolic of Afghanistan. Jefferess, contemplating Amir as a straightforward representation of Afghanistan within the narrative, notes that he "cannot function as a symbolic figure representing the 'nation' in a simple one-to-one equivalence" (2009, 394); his experience simply does not encapsulate the full complexity of life in Afghanistan in the last decades of the 20th century. Hosseini utilises the metafictional structure here to allow Amir to abdicate his role as primary storyteller in this section of the novel and concede centre stage to those characters situated within the narrative as having experienced the trauma of the Taliban regime. By placing Amir as narrator at a naïve remove Hosseini illustrates the extent to which certain narratives are not contained within cultural memory in the West and struggle to be recognised as traumatic. Amir's knowledge of such suffering, now ostensibly limited by his time in America, defers to Rahim Khan's specific experience of the conditions that led to the emergence of the Taliban.

Once in Pakistan with Rahim, Amir admits his relative ignorance to the reader, commenting that he knew "much of it already" but "some" information had escaped his knowledge (Hosseini 2003, 184). Rahim is thereby placed in a position of narrative authority while Amir takes on the role of ignorant bystander as he interviews his old family friend for the benefit of the reader. Amir poses questions that foreground his status as outsider such as "why didn't you leave?" (Hosseini 2003, 84). Rahim simply states that Kabul was his "home", thereby confirming his role as knowledgeable insider to Amir's diasporic outsider

(Hosseini 2003, 84). Through Rahim, the reader gains insight into the time which has elapsed in Afghanistan since Amir's departure; significantly, Hosseini tasks Rahim with communicating that the arrival of the Taliban was not celebrated for its brutality. Instead, the rise of the Taliban is contextualised within decades of conflict from which this group promised deliverance. Amir's curiosity, set up to mirror Western interest in Afghanistan, takes as its focus the most extreme, publicised example of brutality in the Taliban and approaches the question of their reign in a manner which implicitly positions Afghans as complicit in their own oppression by staying in Kabul, as Rahim Khan did, to endure their regime.

Hosseini undermines Amir's assumptions, and the Western perceptions they ostensibly represent, by allowing Rahim Khan to testify to his own experience of the Taliban and their rise to power. Rahim recalls dancing in the street "when the Taliban rolled in and kicked the Alliance out of Kabul" (Hosseini 2003, 184). He describes people "greeting the Taliban in the streets, climbing their tanks and posing for pictures with them" and thereby admits to truth in the notion that Afghans were not immediately or uniformly opposed to Taliban rule (Hosseini 2003, 185). However, this image of jubilation is not allowed to stand unchallenged and is immediately posited within a context which insists that we bear witness to the suffering by which it was engendered. Through Hosseini's allegorical representation of Afghanistan's traumatic stagnation via Amir's individual trauma and its aftermath, we enter this context with an implicit understanding of the suffering underpinning these scenes of celebration at the Taliban's arrival. Rahim's testimony offers further insight as he informs Amir that "people were so tired of the rockets, the gunfire" and "the explosions" that they unreservedly welcomed the peace promised by the Taliban (Hosseini 2003, 185). Rahim Khan asserts, at Amir's prompting, that when the Taliban arrived "they were heroes" promising "peace at last" at a price that was not yet known (Hosseini 2003, 185). With this

statement Rahim usurps discourse which refuses to acknowledge nuance in Afghanistan's national politics. The reader is instead forced into identification with a population whose circumstances made the Taliban appear as a credible alternative.

However, Hosseini's attempt to offer context when depicting the rise of the Taliban fails to sufficiently acknowledge non-Afghan actors, and specifically American ones, who were involved in creating the mayhem that the Taliban promised to end. The contributing parties to this conflict are only vaguely referenced as the "Alliance" with no comment on where these forces received their funding.[5] In what would seem an opportune section of the narrative to explore the role of the CIA in particular in funding warlords during the Soviet-Afghan war and in the aftermath of this conflict, Hosseini elects instead to focus only on absolving the Afghan people for the rise of the Taliban, an acquittal that, while convincing, nevertheless is quite hollow where other responsible parties are not identified.

Once in Afghanistan, Hosseini persists with a narrative frame that positions Amir as an outsider. Amir remarks to his driver, Farid, that he feels "like a tourist" in his "own country" (Hosseini 2003, 214). This statement is met with some hostility from Farid, who challenges the notion that Afghanistan can still be considered Amir's country "after twenty years living in America" (Hosseini 2003, 214). Farid then broadens his criticism to address Amir's membership of an elite, upper-class society during his childhood in Kabul as Hosseini articulates an uncomfortable truth that has been heretofore unspoken. Farid guesses at a childhood spent in a "big two- or three-story house" with his father "driving an American car" and keeping "servants, probably Hazaras" (Hosseini 2003, 215). Sensing the accuracy of his description, Farid tells Amir that he has "*always* been a tourist" in Afghanistan (Hosseini

[5] The "Alliance", as named here by Hosseini, refers to The Northern Alliance, the CIA/ISI funded militia group also known as the Mujahideen (Gregory 2004, 37). According to Gregory, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the "most successful militia commanders became warlords" whose "internecine fighting centred on Kabul" after a "joint force of Tajiks and Uzbeks" captured the city in April 1992 and promptly began fighting one another (2004, 37).

2003, 215, emphasis in original). However, for all of Hosseini's efforts here to acknowledge the structural inequalities informing Amir's experience of Afghanistan, he undermines these insights, as Farid's concerns are ultimately devalued. Amir seems to shrug off Farid's criticisms, noting that Rahim Khan had told him not to "expect a warm welcome in Afghanistan from those who had stayed behind and fought the wars" (Hosseini 2003, 215). Later on, Hosseini allows the story of Amir's return to save his orphaned nephew to silence and shame locals who assume he, like other returning members of the diaspora, has come to reclaim his family home; upon hearing Amir's true, more noble, purpose Farid is found "looking down" and "playing with the frayed edges of the straw mat" (Hosseini 2003, 220). The effects of this shaming are mitigated somewhat by Amir's reluctance to be considered honourable in his actions—telling Farid that he was "more right" than he knows in his assumptions—and by our observation of the real and crippling poverty in which local children live, the juxtaposition between their upbringing and that of Amir implicit within the narrative (Hosseini 2003, 221). However, this acknowledgement is made only in passing as Amir guiltily leaves a "fistful of crumpled money" behind to help feed the starving children at Farid's home (Hosseini 2003, 221); this quick salve to Amir's conscience delivered, the narrative moves along, giving no further insight into the lives of these children.

While such characters are relegated to the novel's periphery we remain attuned to Amir's struggle with his own trauma and his failure to participate in global discourse on Afghanistan. Amir's silence on the subject of Afghanistan's troubles and the ways in which it is represented on the world stage is questioned by those he meets on his trip to Kabul. Wahid, Farid's brother, on hearing that Amir earns his living as writer, enquires as to whether he writes "about Afghanistan" (Hosseini 2003, 217). Amir admits to the reader that he feels embarrassed as his last novel had been about a rather frivolous topic that he does not share with his companions. Wahid, confronting what is ostensibly the metafictional purpose of *The*

Kite Runner, suggests that Amir should use his skill as a writer to "tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country" (Hosseini 2003, 218). This prompts Amir to declare that he is "not quite that kind of writer" and brings the conversation to an end (Hosseini 2003, 218). Amir's sheepishness—or what Peter Morey terms "discomfort"—on the topic of his writing is conspicuous here when we consider the importance storytelling held for him at the outset of the novel (2018, 123). This is ultimately the closest Amir comes to outwardly articulating the distance that trauma has placed between his innate writerly talent and his ability to facilitate the witnessing of anything significant, whether of personal or national importance.

Reconciling with the limits trauma has placed on his ability to advocate for himself and Afghanistan, and returning to a position where he is able to effectively facilitate witnessing for the reader, involves for Amir a process wherein he must confront those traumatic events which necessitated his turn away from Afghanistan. Amir's confrontation with Assef, now a Taliban leader and Amir's nephew Sohrab's captor, is the narrative culmination of our protagonist's struggle to deal with the lifelong consequences of childhood trauma. In a heightened set of circumstances stretching the bounds of narrative realism, Hosseini reintroduces the source of Hassan and Amir's trauma so that Amir might have the chance to deal with that which has proved such a hindrance to his development. Importantly, this section of the novel seeks to placate the Western reader who might expect their particular formulation of individualised trauma to find resolution in confrontation. Amir's confrontation with Assef and subsequent airing of his demons to Soraya enacts what Craps refers to as a "central tenet of Western trauma counselling", whereby resolution is found as "traumatic experiences" are "retold and mastered" (2012, 23). At the level of allegory, the frame of Western-conceived trauma is an ill-fit here: its focus on recovery and return to normality seems to facilitate a form of wish-fulfilment as Afghanistan approaches healing through

confrontation with its disruptive factions. This is a healing and movement toward stability that we know has not actually occurred and is therefore disingenuous, illustrating Craps' point that notions of recovery as conceptualised in dominant trauma models are unsuitable where that recovery is focused on individual psychological healing with little attention paid to the factors—colonial oppression, for instance—that have enabled oppression and trauma (2012, 53-54).

Assef, as the symbolic representative for these destructive forces in Afghanistan, declares that he is in his "element" as a Taliban leader and offers an explanation as to how he came to join such a group (Hosseini 2003, 261). As noted earlier, Assef reminds Amir, and therefore the reading audience, that he was never "much of a religious type" but felt that God "wanted him to live for a reason" (Hosseini 2003, 261). Assef, taking on the role described by Banita as "cartoon villain" (2012, 324), explains to Amir that "Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage" (Hosseini 2003, 261). Amir challenges the notion that Assef is on some kind of righteous mission, citing the "stoning", "raping", "flogging" and "massacring" happening at his hands in Kabul every day (Hosseini 2003, 261). Amir's admonishments have little impact upon Assef because, as declared, his interest in the Taliban's religious justification or righteous motivation is merely a smokescreen; it is simply a means to justify the horror he relishes inflicting upon civilians. As Inayatullah puts it, "Assef's motivations for joining the Taliban are not ideological, religious or even monetary. Rather, he simply takes pleasure in inflicting violence" (2013, 333). It seems that Hosseini makes a choice here to foreground an explicitly non-religious character like Assef while confining any devout members of the Taliban to parenthetical acknowledgement at best. This approach to characterising the Taliban is perhaps effective in that it disrupts notions of any intrinsic connection to Islam; however, as Inayatullah notes, Hosseini does not "provide the Taliban with a plausible sociology, a social

psychology, or a political economy" by locating their representative in a straightforward "sociopath" like Assef (2013, 333). As a result Hosseini is "silent on how and why their humanity took such a terrible turn", functionally absolving of responsibility the international powers whose interference played such a role in their emergence (Inayatullah 2013, 333).

Conclusion

Once Amir has confronted and 'worked through' his trauma in this violent encounter with Assef he is able to finally articulate its enormity to Soraya and move forward at last toward genuine realisation of his bildungsroman. Amir describes feeling "something lift" off his chest as he tells his wife "everything" for the "first time in fifteen years of marriage" (Hosseini 2003, 298). When read as allegory, Amir's recovery here is troubling because it must ultimately beg the question: for whom does recovery occur? As Banita notes, the "universal idiom of therapy is meant to gloss over the messy predicament of a nation ravaged by war" (2012, 331); what Banita terms "Western values of redemption and healing" are presented here as "perfectly in tune with the society on which they are being imposed" (2012, 331). Beyond the ways in which Amir's recovery glosses over Afghanistan's ongoing difficulties, there is no such healing available for Hassan. Hassan, now long absent from the narrative, will never be able to 'work through' his trauma, find purpose or catharsis in writing or produce a narrative that fully witnesses his experience. When visiting with Rahim Khan, Amir reads a letter that was written by a newly-literate Hassan shortly before his murder at the hands of the Taliban. The fact that the letter is read posthumously and is largely concerned with wishing Amir well only compounds the lack of narrative space given to Hassan's individual experience and his glaring absence from Amir's recovery arc.

It is ultimately in Hassan's death that Amir finds his final act of redemption or recovery. Following his confession to Soraya it is decided that they should adopt Sohrab and bring him to the United States to live. The adoption process proves difficult, however, and

Sohrab is further traumatised as a result of his frustrations. Unable to cope with the prospect of returning even briefly to an orphanage before the adoption can be completed, Sohrab attempts suicide and narrowly escapes death. As a result of this episode, Sohrab is unable to speak for the remainder of the novel. Before committing to silence he wearily informs Amir that he is "tired of everything" and longs for his "old life" (Hosseini 2003, 324). When read as allegory, Sohrab's silence might symbolise the ways in which trauma born of conflict does not necessarily conform to those recovery-based models emphasised by Western discourse (Craps 2014, 50); the carrying on of trauma in the younger generation is perhaps a point of subversion or resistance, following Amir's recovery arc.

However, attention to this lingering pain is short-lived as Amir informs the reader that "while Sohrab was silent, the world was not" (Hosseini 2003, 332). He explains that "one Tuesday morning last September, the Twin Towers came crumbling down and, overnight, the world changed" (Hosseini 2003, 332). Amir describes the feeling of disorientation as Afghanistan became a topic of conversation across the country and how people would stand "in grocery store lines" discussing cities like "Kandahar, Herat" and "Mazar-i-Sharif" (Hosseini 2003, 332). Importantly, Hosseini does not frame these attacks as something for which Amir, and the Afghan community described in the novel, must answer. Instead, Amir notes that following the attacks and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan, he becomes an advocate for the Afghan community "out of a sense of civic duty" (Hosseini 2003, 333). Having finally confronted the trauma of his youth, Amir is able to participate in the project of rebuilding the Afghan community and the creation of an atmosphere in which Afghanistan can exist in Western consciousness as a fully realised nation. At this point in the narrative Hosseini has brought us, full-circle, back to find the Amir we first met at the outset of *The Kite Runner,* finally ready to assume his role as a voice of transnational communication.

However, this advocacy is limited, as we have seen. The setting for the novel's closing sections is the American location of San Francisco, where the narrative's metafictional frame has been situated all along. This explicit placement of the novel's resolution in this location is problematic in its dependence on the Western context for realisation. By providing a relatively happy ending and signalling the beginnings of Sohrab's recovery, particularly in his new Western home, Hosseini risks suggesting that a resolution is only possible in such a context. Additionally, in offering the reading audience a cathartic ending, Hosseini potentially allows Afghanistan's national trauma to serve only as a temporary narrative complication that is resolved within the scope of the story rather than as a lasting source of disquiet for readers. While Afghanistan gains an advocate in Amir, the narrative move back to San Francisco abruptly denies the reader access to—or allows the reader to ignore—what occurs in Afghanistan as it continues to grapple with decades of turmoil and, now, the devastation caused by the invasion of American forces.

This final oversight compounds the novel's general tendency to ignore or champion Western interference, a trend common to Hosseini's novels; as Morey argues, the "overarching message seems to be that rescue by the West, which is to say the US military, cannot come soon enough" (2018, 97). In the closing sections of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) Hosseini's long-suffering characters are unproblematically liberated from Taliban rule by American bombs; the legitimacy of the invasion is questioned in neither novel. Ultimately, despite its established success in communicating the visceral nature of the trauma experienced in Afghanistan—and making space, undeniably, for this suffering in discourse surrounding 9/11—Hosseini's adoption of Western trauma models elides, as we have seen, a great deal of nuance along the way. In this way, theories of trauma dominant in Western discourse are proven insufficient in capturing the complexity of the history that Hosseini attempts to convey. Hosseini's approach perhaps even reproduces some aspects of this

marginalisation or silencing with overwrought deference, at times, to the Western frame. In Nadeem Aslam’s work, examined in Chapter 2, this deference is absent, replaced with a more confrontational treatment of Afghanistan’s suffering at the hands of global powers.

2

Shared Graves: Empire and Trauma in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*

> "What is more important to the history of the world—the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? A few agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"
>
> Zwigniew Brzezinski (January 1998)

Introduction:

British Pakistani author Nadeem Aslam opens his critically acclaimed 2008 novel *The Wasted Vigil* with the above quotation from President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor. At a press conference Brzezinski had been asked whether he regretted giving "arms and advice to future terrorists" during the Cold War and he responded with glib indifference. By highlighting this former official's callous disregard for the human cost of American foreign policy during the Cold War, Aslam sets the scene for a novel that interrogates the role of international powers like Britain, Russia and the United States in cultivating mayhem in Afghanistan.

The Wasted Vigil is set primarily in the fictionalised town of Usha in Afghanistan where an aged British doctor named Marcus Caldwell lives alone at a house by a lake. The house is visited by a diverse cast of characters, each with some connection to Afghanistan's troubled history. Eóin Flannery refers to Marcus' house as "an international crossroads, a global meeting point", and it is here that representatives of British, America and Russian interference in Afghanistan are confronted with the legacy of their nations' various colonial

endeavours (2013, 299). Lara, a Russian woman, arrives at the house looking for her brother, who died fighting with Soviet forces in Afghanistan. David, an American and former CIA operative, is a regular visitor to the house, having met Marcus through a relationship with his daughter, Zameen. Aslam intertwines the fates of these characters and the tragedies that have befallen their relationships in order to symbolise the impact of complex geopolitical manoeuvres upon stability in Afghanistan. Aslam's narrator comments that "the entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country" (2008, 40) and as a result "Afghanistan had collapsed and everyone's life now lies broken at different levels within the rubble" (2008, 39). It is this rubble that Aslam attempts to sift through in *The Wasted Vigil,* revealing with each excavation the extent to which his characters' fates are intermingled. For instance, we find out that Benedikt, Lara's brother, played a role in kidnapping Zameen and raped her; it was a CIA colleague of David's that eventually murdered Zameen—the implications of this violence finding its outlet against Afghan women in particular is a significant point to which we will return.

Other visitors include locals such as Casa, a young Afghan man with radical leanings and affiliations to a local warlord, and Dunia, a schoolteacher fleeing persecution and seeking refuge with Marcus. Later stages of the novel see the introduction of characters such as James Palentine, an American military operative whose extremist tendencies are explored in the context of the post-9/11 'war on terror'. As we bear witness, Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* destabilises rhetoric designed to legitimise violence against Afghanistan since the post-9/11 invasion of October 2001. As Alla Ivanchikova puts it in "Imagining Afghanistan in the Aftermath of 9/11: Conflicting Literary Chronographies of One Invasion", the "novel is concerned with excavation and anamnesis" and with the "recovery of forgotten layers of the past" (2017a, 209). Through the depiction of cultural trauma as experienced by individual characters the likes of which are not given space by contemporary media frames and whose

stories are not contained in cultural memory, Aslam succeeds in highlighting the role that international interference has played in creating chaos in Afghanistan and cultivating the conditions necessary for extremism to flourish.

9/11, Cultural Memory and the Cold War in Afghanistan:

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, the global conversation about terror and extremism has been dominated by Western perspectives, with voices emanating from less privileged or influential parts of the world often ignored. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the 9/11 attacks have been identified by mainstream media and numerous critics as an epoch-defining incident. In *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories and Images*, Allen Meek suggests that the "attacks shattered the self-image of liberal democratic societies as immune from massive destruction" (2010, 172). The shock of the attacks was interpreted and recognised as traumatic by news media, film, television, and photography (Meek 2010, 171); notions of collective trauma and victimhood became dominant frames for understanding and responding to the attacks in their aftermath (Meek 2010, 171). According to Jenny Edkins in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, this immediate incorporation of the attacks into "frameworks of trauma" in the US allowed the state to "move quickly with its offer of revenge retaliation as a suitable and legitimate answer to that traumatic tear in the fabric of normality" (cited in L. Bond 2015, 47). Efforts to reclaim authority for the state were immediately launched following the attacks; feelings of powerlessness and confusion were channelled into the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' so that instability could be mitigated by identifying an enemy in the Afghan, and eventually Iraqi, populations.

For the invasion of Afghanistan in particular, justifying retaliatory violence following 9/11 involved robust efforts to obfuscate the impact of emergent American hegemony during the Cold War upon stability in the region. As Meek has noted, dealing with 9/11 as a trauma for a victimised "Western society" distracted from the "historical impact of American

military interventions on non-Western nations" (2010, 178). Afghanistan had, of course, been at the centre of the Cold War between the then USSR and the United States. In the West, the Cold War exists in cultural memory as a period when two ideologically opposed superpowers fought for dominance on the world stage, never declaring outright war against one another. Aslam emphasises throughout this novel, however, the reality that the Cold War was "only cold for the rich and privileged parts of the world" (2008, 37).

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, international interference in Afghanistan is not a new phenomenon. British presence in the region lasted from 1838 to 1919; Afghanistan attracted the attention of the United States in 1946 with the introduction of the Helmand project, a "hydraulic regime" in southern Afghanistan designed to modernise the region (Gregory 2004, 31). According to Derek Gregory in *The Colonial Present*, the United States maintained this rather benign interest in Afghanistan until 1950, when Pakistan suspended oil exports to Afghanistan and, due to the alliance between Pakistan and the US, Kabul "crossed the street" to "sign major trade and aid agreements" with the USSR (2004, 33). From 1956 onward both superpowers poured aid into the region, building infrastructure and trying to gain influence (Gregory 2004, 33). This competition escalated in 1979 when, following the collapse of the Afghan monarchy in 1973, Soviet forces invaded; the United States deployed CIA operatives to manage the resistance to Soviet expansion. The CIA, along with Pakistan's equivalent in the ISI, funded the Mujahideen, a group of volunteer fighters from across the Islamic world, eventually giving rise to prominent figures like Osama bin Laden. As Barnett R. Rubin notes, when the Soviet Union collapsed, "the Afghan regime it had propped up crumbled", leaving a vacuum that would be filled by the Mujahideen, now split into "feuding warlords and ethnic militia" (2013, 25). These warlords were only displaced with the rise of the Taliban in 1996.

In analysing these dynamics it is important to note that American intervention into Afghanistan during the Cold War was not merely a response to Soviet aggression. According to Gregory, the Carter administration had "already tried to exploit the rivalries between Afghanistan's two communist factions" and had "been secretly aiding the insurgents for six months before the Red Army arrived in Kabul" (2004, 35). Gregory notes that Carter's National Security adviser was consciously drawing the Soviets into what he called the "Afghan trap", waiting for the day it could "entangle the USSR in 'its own Vietnam war'" (2004, 35). It is these layers of subterfuge that Aslam relentlessly targets in *The Wasted Vigil,* having Lara remark to David at one point that the United States saw in Afghanistan the opportunity to "give the Soviets their Vietnam" (2008, 111).

More galling still, for Aslam, is the sense that this history is forgotten or disregarded. As Hartman notes, after the fall of the USSR and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the region, Afghanistan "fell off the [American] map" (Hartman cited in Gregory 2004, 37). Of course, Afghanistan returned to the American political landscape after the 9/11 attacks, when it was disingenuously singled-out as a terrorist haven.[1]

In the lead up to 'Operation Enduring Freedom'—the official name for the 'war on terror' that began with the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001—Afghanistan re-emerged onto the world stage, now associated with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda; the violence of the Cold War and its aftershocks did not emerge as significant discussion points in the discourse surrounding the invasion. In an interview with Maya Jaggi for *The Guardian* in 2013, Aslam explained some of the linkages that his work attempts to uncover. He describes the power vacuum left after Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent loss of interest from the

[1] As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the invasion of Afghanistan was far from an obvious reaction to 9/11. None of the hijackers were Afghan and given that "al-Qaeda is part of a distributed network of loosely articulated groups supposedly operating in over 40 countries", invading Afghanistan could not be viewed as a logical necessity but rather as an attempt to "territorialise" an enemy that the US could then be seen to defeat (Gregory 2004, 50-51).

Americans with an emphasis on the amnesia surrounding these events in cultural memory in the West. Aslam points out that "10 years later 9/11 happened and half the world woke up", noting incredulously that "they had no idea it came out of the Cold War" (Jaggi 2013). Aslam expanded this point further in an interview with Julian Gough in 2013, commenting that 9/11 was perceived in the Western world as "a non-political moment, as though it came out of nowhere". Aslam recalls the question that was so famously posed after the attacks: "why do they hate us?" (Gough 2013). For Aslam, the answer to this was obviously to be found in politics. Walking past the White House while teaching at Georgetown University in 2009, Aslam marvelled at "how words on grey paper in the 1980s became fists, electric wires and instruments of torture which broke members of my family and friends", referencing US cooperation with Pakistani President Zia's regime as an example of widespread interference in the region (Jaggi 2013).

Aslam as Transnational Writer

It is these connections that Aslam reveals and maps in *The Wasted Vigil.* In this sense, Aslam understands writing as an inherently political occupation. Writing for *Granta Magazine* in 2010, Aslam commented that he "cannot help feeling that a work of art can be a powerful instrument against injustice" (Aslam 2010). Aslam went further in an interview at Hay Festival in Dhaka in 2013, emphatically arguing that "literature is a public act; it's a political act" (Aslam 2013b). This understanding of his own work as political and as responding to geopolitical events has infused Aslam's writing with a distinctly non-parochial quality. As Oona Frawley argues in "Global Civil War and Post-9/11 Discourse in *The Wasted Vigil"*, Aslam is an author whose interests defy his categorisation as belonging to any one national tradition or indeed as an author of immigrant fiction (2013, 442). Aslam has amassed considerable critical success since his debut with *Season of the Rainbirds* in 1992; his novels have been shortlisted for major literary prizes such as the IMPAC Prize and the

DSC Prize for South Asian Literature; he is also a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Though Aslam emerges as part of a growing group of Pakistani writers like Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2007) and Kamila Shamsie (*Home Fire*, 2017), and this background certainly informs his work, it does not limit his perspective. Frawley describes Aslam as a "global novelist", a term that indicates

> an author whose work not only goes beyond the boundaries of their 'home' nation, but who is also concerned with global processes of war and migration, and with globalization generally; it also indicates the fact that such authors are writing for a global – and not a narrowly local – audience, and, because of international publishing, have access to a wide audience. (2013, 442)

This interest in global discourse manifests in *The Wasted Vigil,* with Daniel O'Gorman describing it as a "consciously globalized" novel (2015, 112). O'Gorman argues that the novel enacts a "stepping-back" whereby 9/11 is "automatically" placed "in a complex geopolitical context", so that it is elevated "to a more prominent position in the Western reader's frame of perception" (2015, 121). Flannery makes a similar argument regarding Aslam's treatment of 9/11 as an incident in context, arguing that *The Wasted Vigil* reveals the "continuities of history that continue to scar remote corners of the world, like Afghanistan", refusing to let 9/11 "stand alone, peerless among tragic crimes against humanity" (2013, 299). In this chapter I am specifically concerned with the ways in which Aslam addresses these geopolitical processes and de-centres 9/11 by giving narrative space to traumas not contained in Western discourse around Afghanistan.

For Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan American novelist and Aslam's contemporary, the task of advocating for Afghanistan is complicated by a desire to make the country, and its people, accessible and non-threatening for a Western audience. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner,* discussed in Chapter 1, attempts to "put a human face" on Afghanistan (Hosseini 2013, III).

As analysed in Chapter 1, Hosseini takes on the role of the transnational writer but in many ways maintains a certain deference to, or preoccupation with, the national frame, seeking to interpret Afghanistan and Afghan culture for a largely Western reading audience. This ultimately compromises the complexity of Hosseini's text at several key points as Afghan cultural norms are minimized in favour of Western ones; for example, early parts of the narrative find our young protagonist, Amir, indulging in American films and Coca-Cola while trying to gain the affection of his father, a secularized figure who drinks alcohol and despises dogmatic interpretations of Islam. If this prioritisation of Western cultural norms appears troubling, more damaging still is Hosseini's depiction of Afghanistan's national trauma following decades of conflict.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis and during discussion of Hosseini's work in Chapter 1, a major concern for the authors under discussion is the task of communicating trauma in a transcultural context. Stef Craps has outlined the challenge, describing in "Beyond Eurocentricism: Trauma theory in the global age" dominant Western definitions of trauma as envisioning a "single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" most often occurring in the life of an individual (2014, 50). In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds,* Craps outlines the ways in which such definitions do not account for the trauma born of systemic oppression that affects those beyond "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (2012, 20).[2] Given its focus on this most privileged of demographics, dominant Western models envisage trauma primarily as a unique or one-off event within an individual psyche; crucially, as "Western trauma counselling" would have it, recovery can be enacted by retelling traumatic experiences so that they can be "mastered", a model that may traverse "local coping strategies" (2012, 23) and grossly simplify contexts—colonial

[2] In formulating these definitions, as noted in the introduction, Craps references Laura Brown's work in "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" (1995).

contexts, for example—where trauma may be "unrelenting" or "generalised" as described by Craps (2014, 54).

For Hosseini, the solution to this ill-fit is a mediated approach to the depiction of trauma that does not conform to dominant Western definitions. Hosseini translates the trauma of Afghanistan's recent decades of conflict into Hassan's allegorical rape—Hassan being the best friend of our protagonist and narrator, Amir. The impact of Hassan's rape and the trauma it engenders ripples through the rest of the narrative, giving the audience insight into the devastation caused by the persistent upheaval in Afghanistan during the late 20th century. This approach is effective in that the rape is easily recognised as traumatic according to dominant Western understanding. This use of allegory is designed to maximise the potential for comprehension among the imagined Western readership while Hosseini is able to avoid the task of directly couching ongoing trauma born of conflict in unsuitably narrow Western terms. However, as explained in detail in Chapter 1, Hosseini's methods here are problematic in several ways. To begin with, rendering national trauma through the allegorical rape of Hassan is ultimately exploitative as Hassan is exiled from the narrative while we focus on the trauma of Amir as witness to his assault; Hassan's status as an ethnic Hazara—a minority in Afghanistan—in this context is additionally troubling as the systemic oppression visited upon such groups is glossed-over within the narrative. Finally, Hosseini adheres in *The Kite Runner* to recovery-based models—Amir's recovery read as allegory for Afghanistan's national healing—in ways that simplify to a harmful extent the still ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, ultimately aggrandising American interference post-9/11 and encouraging only a de-politicised, touristic, and vague engagement with suffering.

Aslam's approach to depicting Afghanistan's decades of conflict and trauma in *The Wasted Vigil* takes quite a different tack, in line with his interest in rendering Afghan history in a global context. The depiction of trauma in this novel is not an attempt to endear

Afghanistan, or Afghans, to a Western readership or encourage empathetic identification. Instead, the representation of trauma in *The Wasted Vigil* is more accurately described as confrontational and accusatory—and inherently political, as described above—in its treatment of those global power structures responsible for Afghanistan's continued strife; Afghanistan is situated explicitly as a colonial space suffering the effects of occupation past and present. David Lloyd, in "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?", describes this approach to representing suffering in regions like Afghanistan as eschewing "mourning" in favour of "rage" (2000, 214). Writing specifically about commemorations of the Irish Famine Lloyd contemplates whether "rage might not be a more proper response to those deaths and sufferings for which mourning is redundant now" (2000, 214). "Rage" in this context refers to a refusal on the part of writers, artists and other cultural spokespeople in conflict regions to engage in mere commemoration or the "therapeutic" representation of trauma (Lloyd 2000, 222). In Lloyd's estimation, to represent recovery or to allow for therapeutic engagement with trauma in these contexts is to de-politicise suffering and participate in the reproduction of systems of oppression (2000, 222). Sam Durrant, in "Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning", draws significantly on Lloyd's work to suggest that a "recalcitrant, anti-therapeutic form of mourning" is needed so that resistance to harmful power structures—specifically those of colonial occupation and oppression—can be enacted to avoid "illusory" moments of "reconciliation" (2014, 96). Durrant invokes Adorno to suggest that the aesthetic sphere is "capable of administering the kind of shock that would liberate us from our ideological insulation and awaken us to the fact of our domination" (2014, 97). In order to unlock this potential, Durrant promotes a version of trauma writing where the form of the novel does not allow us to forget or reconcile the colonial trauma described; instead, it maintains a disturbing presence within the narrative, resisting notions of resolution.

Sites of Memory and Trauma: The House

Aslam embeds tragedy into the space where the plot unfolds by making Marcus Caldwell's house a "site of memory", to use Pierre Nora's phrase. The house functions as the locus of the story, the space in which the main characters interact with each other and Afghanistan's history. It "stands on the edge of a small lake" with an "overgrown garden and orchard" at its back (Aslam 2008, 10); here, the ground rises gradually away from the house toward the snow-capped mountains containing the "caves of Tora Bora" (Aslam 2008, 10). With this mention of the caves of Tora Bora where bin Laden was reputed to have hidden, Aslam situates his narrative at the heart of Afghanistan's most infamous land formation; he brings readers to witness the daily lives of those living at the epicentre of post-9/11 conflict.

Marcus, a descendent of the English colonising presence in Afghanistan, has lived in this place for more than forty years, having bought the property just before his marriage to Qatrina, also a doctor. The house was built by an "old master calligrapher and painter in the last years of the nineteenth century" (Aslam 2008, 12). Each room is dedicated to one of the five senses, with verses and scenes from the Koran used to illustrate that room's designated sense. Above the door leading to the room about hearing, for example, "Allah created through the spoken word" is inscribed (Aslam 2008, 12). The narrator tells us that the painter used the murals to impress the woman who was to be his wife; he brought the woman on a tour of the house, leaving the room at the highest point till last. The murals in this room "contained and combined all that had gone before—an interior dedicated to love, the ultimate human wonder" (Aslam 2008, 13). It was here that the woman agreed to marry the painter, and the images remained upon the walls into Marcus and Qatrina's tenure at the house. By highlighting the role of Islam in the creation of these images, Aslam subtly demonstrates the capacity within the religion to communicate love and beauty; he quietly establishes Islam as a fundamental part of Afghanistan's cultural history by forcing the reader to recognise the

religion as a source of benign positivity. Thus Aslam presents Islam as foundational in the creation of a house that is to become a sanctuary for those affected by the country's conflicts.

If the property introduced Islam as a positive influence on Afghanistan, it also contains other, alternative versions of the Afghan past. When Marcus and Qatrina open a perfume factory and an underground room is dug for its "coolness and softer light", the workers discover the head of a "great Buddha, lying on its side" (Aslam 2008, 22). The presence of the statue on the property, nearby the murals dedicated to Koranic verses on the house's walls, disrupts notions of cultural purity and communicates Afghanistan's diverse history. The Gandhara sculptures symbolise Afghanistan's pre-Islamic history, and the reader is informed that "this province was one of the most important sites in the Buddhist world from the second to the seventh centuries AD", thus explaining the presence of the icon (Aslam 2008, 22). This is key to what Ivanchikova describes as the way in which Aslam "situates the upheavals of the last forty years within the country's history that spans millennia" (2017a, 209). Marcus built the perfume factory around the Buddha statue, constructing "work stations and storage areas and shelving" in the surrounding space. This allows, symbolically at least, Afghanistan's Buddhist history to represent a supportive backdrop to what Aslam emphasises throughout the narrative as Afghanistan's longstanding reputation as an important region in perfume making. Ultimately, Aslam situates Marcus' house as a site that bears evidence of those practices, religious and otherwise, which have combined to create Afghanistan's specific cultural heritage. The Buddha statue and the perfume factory coexist alongside the Islamic murals inside the house as individual representations of the various facets of Afghan history. There is no conflict between the Buddha and the Koranic verses; nor is there any conflict noted between the religious iconography present and the practice of perfume making. Aslam allows the house and its grounds to act as an unofficial museum, cataloguing significant periods and aspects of

Afghan history and highlighting the ways in which these seemingly oppositional influences could exist harmoniously, and even complement each other.

However, if Aslam shows the potential for different religions and traditions to exist side by side, the darker side of Afghanistan's national history is also memorialised on the property. The house remembers the Taliban most vividly, situating it as the culmination of various destructive forces in Afghanistan's recent history. According to Barnett R. Rubin, the Taliban was a "transnational movement" created by "ultra conservative Afghan and Pakistani religious leaders" in the "Afghan-Pakistani border areas" during the worst of the Soviet-Afghan war, coming to power in Afghanistan in 1996 (2013, 54). Propped up by "Pakistani aid", the Taliban came to "capture the capital and two-thirds of the country's territory", recruiting boys and young men, often orphans, from refugee camps and impoverished areas to be trained at specialised Madrassas along the border Afghanistan shares with Pakistan (Barnett 2013, 25). Aslam describes young Taliban recruits as "mostly poor foot soldiers from primitive and impoverished backgrounds" (2008, 240); they are "vulnerable and easy to control", meaning that it "didn't take much to work them up into a frenzy over what they were taught to believe as religious truth" (Aslam 2008, 240).

Aslam describes the Taliban's regime as a time when "Afghanistan became a land whose geology was fear instead of rock, where you breathed in terror not air" (2008, 241). In Aslam's novel, the Taliban represents the culmination of decades of conflict; its particular penchant for suffering and chaos emerges out of decades of on-going instability and trauma, eventually leaving its own mark upon the country and upon Marcus' house through Qatrina's suffering under their reign. In a flashback we learn that, in addition to her work as a doctor, Qatrina was a talented artist; when a series of paintings Qatrina makes are stolen and Marcus attempts to recover them, he and the thief draw the attention of the Taliban. The two men are transported to a local mosque, and since Marcus had "no way to prove" that the paintings

belong to him, it is decided that "his hand would be cut off as punishment for theft" and that Qatrina would carry out the punitive mutilation (Aslam 2008, 242).

The months that followed found Qatrina struggling with the trauma of amputating her husband's hand, entirely transformed from the strong-willed and progressive woman she had been before the amputation. We are told that as the trauma took hold Qatrina "would not speak, or couldn't, kept her face to the walls, to the shadows" (Aslam 2008, 244). She would wander off "into the burning noonday sun" with no regard for her health, "feinting at pomegranate blossoms thinking they were live coals, fireflowers" (Aslam 2008, 244). We are told that Marcus' pain, at the site of his amputated hand, was frequently so terrible that he "could have howled for entire days" and felt as though he "had closed the absent fingers" of his missing hand "around a scorpion, around shards of glass" (Aslam 2008, 245). However, as he returns from hospital "to find all the books in the house nailed to the ceilings" Marcus recognised pain of another sort troubling Qatrina —the pain of intense psychological trauma (Aslam 2008, 245).

As it is described in the novel, Qatrina's suffering carries many of the characteristic traits common to dominant Western definitions of trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a "wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (1996, 3). Caruth suggests that trauma is the result of "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" that the sufferer is unable to process (1996, 11). On the surface, Qatrina's trauma sits very much within these definitions of trauma that are popular in Western literary and cultural scholarship. Qatrina experienced a harrowing instance of violence and was unable to cope in the aftermath as her mind was plagued by the incomprehensibility of the cruelty she was forced to abet. However, there is a dimension to Qatrina's suffering which is not so neatly served by Western definitions of trauma.

Qatrina was once a staunch advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan; she frequently fought with men who would bring their wives to her "almost dead" from the strain of back-to-back pregnancies without adequate time for recovery (Aslam 2008, 95). Qatrina "had struggled with the mosques" over birth control (Aslam 2008, 95) and once tore a branch from a sapling in frustration at the plight of a young woman who "had had seven children in six years" (Aslam 2008, 94). Lara comments that the tree looks as though "lightning struck it"—such was the ferocity of Qatrina's opposition to women's oppression (Aslam 2008, 94). Qatrina's defiance of these norms manifested in her own physicality; her family "shuddered as she became taller with each passing year, her height too immodest for a woman, a portent of catastrophe" (Aslam 2008, 244). However, Qatrina's stature was instead a portent of her determination to challenge systemic oppression of women. Upon marrying Marcus she insisted on having a "woman perform the rites" because she felt an obligation "to help change things" in her daily life (Aslam 2008, 39).

Qatrina's steadfast efforts toward gradual change were thwarted by the arrival of the Taliban. Aslam acknowledges that much of the "frenzy" underpinning their behaviour was characterised by gendered violence and oppression (2008, 240). Aslam's narrator bluntly notes that "domination over women was a simple way to organise and embolden them" (2008, 240). Aslam describes the Taliban's dominion over women as total as they

> asked for all windows to be painted black so no one would catch a glimpse of a woman. Earning a living was declared inappropriate conduct for females, resulting in arrest in insubordination against Allah's will. Trying to escape a Taliban beating for exposing her feet, her burka not being long enough, a young woman had in her terror run in front of an oncoming Taliban jeep. She bled to death in front of Marcus' clinic because—being male—he was not allowed to administer to her. Women became afraid of catching even the smallest of

> illnesses: left untreated, it could grow and cause death—and Marcus did see a twelve-year-old die of measles. (Aslam 2008, 240)

The atmosphere of fear and control described here by Aslam culminates in Marcus' amputation. Qatrina responds defiantly to the Taliban initially, using her body to enact resistance as she "stood too full height" and "lifted her burqa" to look "into the eyes of the boy in front of her" (Aslam 2008, 243-244). Once forced to comply and amputate her own husband's hand, however, we see Qatrina's trauma extend well beyond the experiences accounted for by dominant Western definitions. For Qatrina, the arrival of the Taliban signalled the nullification of her efforts and aspirations; as conditions grew worse under Taliban reign, Qatrina's faith in progress wavered and the hopelessness of ongoing conflict crept into her consciousness. This trauma sits squarely in the realm determined by Craps as being born of systemic oppression and excluded from dominant Western definitions (2014, 50).

The aspects of Qatrina's trauma that warrant consideration beyond the confines of such narrow understandings of trauma are inscribed in the house; they are presented as permanent scars upon the physical landscape of the novel, mimicking the long-lasting impact of such suffering. Qatrina's decision to nail the couple's vast collection of books to the highest points in the house can be read as an attempt on the part of her traumatised mind to place them out of reach of destructive forces—her actions are an effort to continue resisting the reality of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. Though Qatrina dies before the Taliban is routed out of power, the books remain as a symbol of the resistance and desperation their rule inspired. The presence of this ceiling-bound library in the background of some of the novel's most significant scenes means that neither readers nor characters are permitted to forget the trauma permeating the physical space of Aslam's fictionalised Afghanistan. We are reminded of the books periodically, such as when Lara finds an

American soldier "peeling off a book with both hands" just before she hears the fate of the brother she lost to the Soviet-Afghan war (Aslam 2008, 359). On another level, we might recognise Qatrina's actions as an extension of Aslam's general attitude toward the role of the novel as political, as a medium through which the deeds of the powerful can be recorded (Aslam 2013b). Aslam fulfils this obligation in *The Wasted Vigil*—a novel which is as effective a repository of memory and symbol of resistance as any text referenced within its pages.

Trauma is further inscribed upon the landscape of Marcus' property when Qatrina's death leaves its mark. Feeling compelled to facilitate resistance against the Taliban wherever possible, Marcus and Qatrina open a school on the site of their now-abandoned perfume factory—a decision for which the Taliban sentence them to death. The couple are transported away from their home in separate pickup trucks while listening to the gunfire emanating "from the house" (Aslam 2008, 265). Marcus would later discover that the men had been shooting at the murals lining the walls, enraged at the life depicted in the images. The Taliban are similarly enraged when they discover the Buddha statue lying on the factory floor. They fire their machine guns at the head only to stop, perplexed, when the statue "bled gold" (Aslam 2008, 267). According to Alla Ivanchikova in "Imagining Afghanistan in Deep Time: Nadeem Aslam and the Aesthetics of the Geologic Turn", the "Buddha's head" in this instance represents "a part of the past that is indestructible" (2017b, 297). The bleeding, coupled with the arrival of the ghost of Marcus and Qatrina's daughter Zameen, puts the Taliban "to flight" (Aslam 2008, 267). Importantly, the reading audience is not provided with an opportunity to reconcile with these fantastical episodes. The appearance of a protective ghost and the protestations of an otherwise inanimate religious icon from Afghanistan's past signify the extent to which the Taliban, and extremist organisations of their kind, represent a blight on Afghan society. Aslam normalises the interventions of supernatural forces as a way

to communicate the notion that the Taliban are a scourge to Afghan culture and society—an extremist perversion of Islam that Afghanistan's very environment will seek extraordinary means to reject and expel; this anticipates Aslam's use of ghosts and haunting to represent the burden of imperial violence in *The Blind Man's Garden,* as discussed in Chapter 3.

However, despite the intervention of the fantastical, Marcus' house is left to bear the scars of the Taliban's presence. He is spared by the Taliban and eventually returns home after Qatrina's stoning to find a house that retains visible evidence of all the violence that has occurred within its walls. Still fearing the Taliban, Marcus adds to this collection of physical reminders by smearing "all depictions of living things" with mud (Aslam 2008, 13).

The house is in this state at the opening of Aslam's novel: a house with beautiful murals smeared in mud and bullet holes in walls and ancient statues. Viewed as symbolic of Afghanistan, Aslam's novel takes place in what is established, as Frawley puts it, as a "palimpsestic arena" (2013, 440). Rumour insists that the house is haunted by a Djinn—a "malevolent" spirit whose legend encompasses the trauma associated with the space in local memory (Aslam 2008, 25). This rumour is eventually revealed to have originated with the local cleric who is determined to keep people from the land adjacent to the lake, where he buried his murdered wives. Nevertheless, the persistence of local belief in the haunting speaks to the degree of suffering experienced in the region and widespread recognition of the lingering impact of trauma. For those willing to brave its reputation, the house operates as a site where both locals and outsiders gather to deal with their relationship to Afghanistan's national trauma. Readers witness the magnitude of the suffering visited upon this space as these characters representing American, Russian and British interference in Afghanistan interact and come to realise the ways in which the country has been "torn to pieces by the many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world" (Aslam 2008, 14).

Lara, David and the Cold War in Afghanistan

As the narrative opens we find Larissa Petrovna alone in Marcus' house, contemplating her surroundings. As Lara marvels at the ceiling-bound library, we are told that "her mind is a haunted house", immediately indicating that grief had brought her to Afghanistan and connecting her to the physical space of the house (Aslam 2008, 1); she bears mental scars from Afghanistan's history of violence that mirror the markings upon the ceilings and the walls. Lara is a "native of St Petersburg", in Afghanistan searching for the brother she lost to the Soviet-Afghan war (Aslam 2008, 5). Her search has involved tracking down "soldiers who knew her brother, gathering valuable clues" and then planning trips to Afghanistan in the hope that the country itself might retain some memory of his time there (Aslam 2008, 30). At home, Lara has been offered only the rhetoric promoted by the Russian government in efforts to salvage cultural memory surrounding the success of Soviet interests in the Cold War; Lara's understanding of the Cold War has been limited by the determined efforts of government officials to paint a favourable picture of Soviet exploits abroad.

Aslam provides insight into the version of Soviet history to which Lara has been exposed so that he can effectively undermine its credibility for the reader. Importantly, his purpose here is not to tie Russian denials of detrimental interference in Afghanistan to the post-9/11 efforts of Western powers to gloss over their own history in the region—these points remain entirely distinct throughout the narrative. Instead, in examining Russian attitudes toward the region, Aslam is remarking upon the reality that the most powerful nations in the international community have a collective history of obfuscating their role in Afghanistan's turmoil. Aslam's omniscient narrator draws on Lara's knowledge of the Cold War to inform readers that an estimated "331 soldiers" remain missing since the height of the conflict, though we are urged to regard this figure cautiously as it might "be one of Moscow's lies" (Aslam 2008, 30). The narrator draws on Lara's distrust of the Russian establishment

with this warning; we are given the sense that though Lara is ignorant of the particulars of Soviet aggression abroad, she is not blind to the possibility that the government have been actively engaged in glossing-over the realities of the campaign. Significantly, Aslam's figures here appear drawn from a 1988 document outlining Soviet losses in the region (Taubman 1988). Summarising the report for the *New York Times*, Philip Taubman notes Soviet estimates of 13,310 killed, 35,478 wounded, and 311 missing, with Moscow still refusing to make "public the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan", lending credibility to Lara's doubts (1988).

The secrecy and dishonesty that Aslam's narration describes as dominating the lives of Lara and all Russians was purposefully undertaken by a government attempting to bolster its own power, promoting a master-narrative that insisted upon military success abroad. Aslam's narrator draws on Lara's impression that as more families lost soldiers and "when losses could no longer be denied or stifled it was judged best to make them fantastically heroic" (Aslam 2008, 31); the narrator describes reports of Soviet soldiers who "kept blowing themselves up with grenades in order to take thirty Afghan rebels with them" (Aslam 2008, 31). We are told that "as the years progressed and the Soviet Union began to be dismantled, they continued to tell lies" and, in Lara's case, "sent her from person to person to exhaust and frustrate" her efforts to find her lost brother (Aslam 2008, 31). Following the collapse of the USSR, Aslam seems to argue, Russian officials did not abandon efforts to cultivate favourable perceptions of Soviet exploits abroad, nor did they acknowledge, any more than American officials, the damage done to places like Afghanistan during the Cold War. Lara arrives in Afghanistan largely ignorant of what occurred there. This ignorance is, of course, not shared by the residents of Usha, for whom cultural memory of the Afghan-Soviet war is deeply engrained. An early example of this lingering awareness of Soviet violence comes as Lara arrives at Marcus' house bruised and ill, having suffered a beating at the hands of some

local boys for napping by the roadside with her feet facing, disrespectfully, toward Mecca. Though the young men had no way of knowing that Lara was Russian, Marcus wonders initially whether Lara had also been poisoned on her travels. His assumption is grounded in the notion that Lara's country "precipitated much of Afghanistan's present-day destruction by invading in 1979" (Aslam 2008, 11). As such, Aslam provides insight into an Afghanistan that has not forgotten the violence perpetrated against its citizens; the deficit in her knowledge of Soviet aggression abroad leaves Lara in a potentially precarious position as an unwitting representation of the Russian legacy in Afghanistan.

However, Lara does not experience any further violence during her time in Usha; Marcus' fears over her coming to harm at the hands of locals determined to enact revenge upon a surrogate for Soviet misdeeds are unfounded. Instead, Aslam renders the lingering effects of Soviet violence in more subtle ways, demonstrating the ways in which this suffering is etched upon the landscape. Lara had had some previous success gathering clues during trips to Afghanistan, piecing together "part of the story" about Benedikt's defection from a military base with another young soldier and a newly-freed Zameen (Aslam 2008, 31). However, Lara's attempts to glean further information in Usha are frustrated by the disarray of war; when asked, Marcus is unable to say whether Benedikt passed through his home because he and Qatrina "were not here at that time—the house was taken over by others" (Aslam 2008, 37). By contrast to the diffuse and disrupted knowledge of individuals, Aslam presents the physical landscape as a repository for cultural memory and trauma that is more encyclopaedic. Ivanchikova describes the "landscape in Aslam's novels" as a "dynamic force", a "full-fledged participant in human history" (2017b, 305). As we have seen, Aslam is determined in his depiction of trauma as something that lingers and makes its mark upon a space, soliciting its own witnesses.

The details pertaining to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan emerge in snippets that intrude into the novel's primary temporal space, prompted as characters encounter physical reminders of trauma in their surroundings. Significantly, we are told that Lara's arrival has caused a substantial disruption in Marcus' life. Marcus' house contains entire rooms that have been abandoned by their owner due to the irreconcilable pain they recall; unable to deal with the memories contained in these rooms, Marcus limited his use of the site to 'safe' rooms and those rooms containing facilities without which he could not survive. Before Lara's arrival, the "kitchen was Marcus' living quarters", while the other rooms were largely left undisturbed, with the "doors fastened" and contents ignored (Aslam 2008, 20). Marcus would frequently avoid spending time on the site entirely, taking off on a "journey" with little notice "whenever he received word about a young man somewhere that could possibly be his lost grandson" (Aslam 2008, 20). However, Lara's stay at the house has put a temporary hold on Marcus' travels and has forced him to open up the house so that it can comfortably accommodate two adults. The result of this exposure to previously closed-off spaces is the re-emergence of traumatic memories such as those surrounding the night of Zameen's disappearance.

As Marcus sits in the garden, newly reacquainted with these spaces, we encounter a shift in the narrative's temporal space; a flashback intrudes to the night in 1980 when Soviet forces came to the house looking for Zameen. These memories are bound up in the traumatic history of Afghanistan and as such Aslam does not tie them exclusively to the history of any singular individual in the narrative. While Marcus is a vessel for these experiences—a victim of horror and atrocity—his story is determinedly described as typical rather than exceptional. In service to this point, Marcus' flashbacks linger only briefly on Zameen's abduction before shifting focus to such abductions as a commonplace phenomenon. We learn that Soviet soldiers broke into the house, threatening Marcus and Qatrina with a gun and asking for

their daughter Zameen by name; Qatrina reacted fearfully, as “there had been reports of Soviet soldiers landing their helicopters to abduct a girl and flying away with her” (Aslam 2008, 17). Loved ones would then be forced to follow “the trail of her clothing across the landscape” before finding her “naked bone-punctured body, where she had been thrown out of the helicopter after the men had been sated” (Aslam 2008, 17). For Marcus, Aslam seems to suggest in describing his living arrangements, strict compartmentalisation as a coping strategy for trauma is a consequence of not only personal anguish but the scale of suffering and the knowledge that his pain is reflective of Afghanistan’s collective trauma. At another point in the narrative, Marcus laments the “ruining of this place” and the “ruining of [his] life”, the two tragedies inextricable (Aslam 2008, 87).

In this way, Marcus’ experience of trauma seems at first glance to conform to notions of “belatedness” as imagined in dominant Western models, though that which he belatedly confronts looms in the form of entire swaths of national history. As explained in earlier sections of this thesis, belatedness is a key aspect of Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma wherein trauma cannot, due to a failure of assimilation that results from shock, be integrated into normal memory and so later intrudes in the form of “hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11). As Alan Gibbs notes in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, and as explained above, though it remains a popular concept in cultural trauma theory, Caruth’s reading of belatedness has incurred significant criticism (Leys 2000) not least because Freud—whose work Caruth draws heavily upon—acknowledges that “trauma is often banished from consciousness deliberately and knowingly, rather than unconsciously erased through amnesia” (Gibbs 2014, 10). Given his self-imposed isolation and avoidance of reminders, this latter form of belatedness, or what Gibbs more accurately calls “conscious repression”, seems to more precisely capture Marcus’ experience of delayed confrontation with trauma, a lack of engagement that indicates a refusal to confront the overwhelming scale

of Soviet violence in Afghanistan (Gibbs 2014, 10). To the extent that these flashbacks disrupt the narrative and adhere to what Craps describes as "modernist textual strategies"—an exclusionary Eurocentric form common to Western trauma writing and based upon notions of trauma's unrepresentability—they do not merely enact a traumatic mimesis where a "failure of narrative" is meant to represent the "psychic experience of trauma" as a singular instance of shock that cannot be reconciled (Craps 2014, 50-51).[3] More importantly, what Gibbs similarly describes as a "genre aesthetic" of trauma writing is employed here to demonstrate the ways in which decades of ongoing suffering are contained in—and emerge most stubbornly from— Afghanistan's landscape, similar to what will be discussed in Chapter 3 as Aslam's rendering of colonial trauma through haunting in *The Blind Man's Garden* (Gibbs 2014, 35). It is the site of the house that enacts what Lloyd calls "rage", disrupting Marcus' ability to forget, continually giving lie to notions of stability. In its "rage" the site is resistant to what Craps has described as notions of recovery that are particular to Western forms of trauma counselling and that can elide the ongoing effects of colonial trauma by focusing on individual healing to the neglect of factors enabling oppression (2014, 53).

The degree of violence present in Aslam's description of these abductions is notably shocking and difficult to comprehend in its relentless intensity; there is no reprieve for the reader as the horror escalates, culminating in the final image of family members mourning abused and discarded daughters and sisters. It is important to note that these scenes are a dramatization of Soviet violence that are difficult to verify. Aslam's purpose, as with other aspects of the narrative, is not to relay a journalistic investigation into the Soviet-Afghan war but to create the impression of a brutal occupation that has left lasting scars. Aslam does not

3 The tendency of Western trauma writing to employ fragmented narrative forms in service of trauma's supposed unrepresentability is explained and critiqued earlier in this thesis. See pp. 37-38.

revel in the victory of having located such a powerfully disturbing narrative device; instead the passage is related sparingly and in a subdued, matter-of-fact tone that allows for the depravity described to reach the reader without unnecessary embellishment, emphasising that such stories had become commonplace in Afghanistan, with violence of this magnitude almost becoming part of the fabric of life for its citizens.

Though Aslam conveys the relentless, pervasive aspect of this violence, he takes care not to trivialise its traumatic impact or venture toward its characterisation as mundane. If anything, Aslam emphasises the mounting, compounding horror of life in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. He foregrounds the extent to which citizens like Marcus did not become accustomed to life under tyranny but have instead become detached from large portions of their own past in order to survive. Of course, some of Marcus' apparent detachment is born from the disorientation and unexplained loss that often accompanies life in a conflict zone. The omniscient narrator comments on the fragmented manner in which the story of Zameen's actual abduction is revealed within the narrative; the fact that Zameen had been out walking with a local communist boy when she was taken would not be known to Marcus "until he met David Town many years later", prompting the narrator to marvel at "*how stories travel—what mouths and minds they end up in"* (Aslam 2008, 24, emphasis in original). This observation reflects the nature of life in a conflict zone where families are routinely ripped apart. Marcus cannot testify to his own familial experience due to family members' separation; instead, we are forced to acknowledge his exclusion and dispossession as the most significant revelations concerning Zameen's fate are drawn from outsiders like David and Lara, who tells Marcus that Zameen had been kept as a source of blood for a Russian officer and of her escape with Benedikt. As noted by Craps, however, more deliberate examples of silence or avoidance such as that which we witness in Marcus—at the beginning of the narrative, through David, Marcus knows of Zameen's kidnapping and of her

having had a child and still avoids local reminders of her absence— can be key to the ethical narrative representation of trauma that does not conform to norms of dominant Western trauma models (2014, 54-55). By highlighting spaces where sufferers may adopt silence as a "coping mechanism" contrary to the "talking cure" preferred by "Western psychology" Aslam can reflect the typicality of such experience in his narrative (Craps 2014, 55).

Ultimately, the counter-narrative of Afghan experience is presented, often without comment, alongside Lara's understanding of Soviet exploits in the region; in this way, Aslam leaves the reading audience to recognise the ways in which rhetoric bolstering the Russian master-narrative has systematically erased its history of wreaking havoc abroad. In a striking example of this obfuscation as it is carried out on an individual level, we are confronted with David's contradiction of the version of events related to Lara by Piotr Danilovich—Benedikt's erstwhile companion and Lara's main source of information regarding the night of Benedikt's defection. David worries about how much Lara has told Marcus "about her brother's assaults on Zameen"—an aspect of the story about which Lara was entirely ignorant (Aslam 2008, 54). As experiences like Zameen's are unfolded incrementally throughout the narrative, there is little opportunity for the reader to grow comfortable or complacent. Instead, these revelations of trauma embedded in the history of the nation continue to emerge and maintain a disruptive, unsettling presence. Specifically, Aslam demonstrates the extent to which Russian narratives had failed to account fully for the role of the USSR in Afghanistan's ongoing turmoil. Aslam makes space for this trauma, convincing the reader to regard Russia as culpable in the cultivation of Afghan suffering and instability.

American involvement in Afghanistan during the Cold War is represented within the narrative by former CIA operative David Town. David has spent much of his life in Afghanistan, but is ultimately situated as an outsider in the culture, if not in the house. As already noted, he has intimate ties to Marcus due to a relationship he maintained with

Zameen following her abduction and escape to live in Jalalabad with her son. In many respects David serves as Lara's counterpart within the narrative: a representative of the US side of the Cold War and a source of commentary for current American involvement in Afghanistan.

Importantly, David's motivations for joining the CIA during the Cold War are acknowledged within the narrative as genuine and personally meaningful, even if flawed. While in conversation with Lara at the house, David is prompted to discuss his brother's involvement in the Vietnam War. It is inferred that Jonathan Town died in 1971 in rather gruesome conditions and at only twenty years old. This inspired, at least partially, David's life-long commitment to the fight against communist expansion.

However, David's understanding of his involvement in the Cold War is decidedly more complex than simple revenge for his brother's death; he views his participation as noble and righteous based on the notion that the Soviet Empire posed a threat to the progress of humanity. We see this distinction emerge as Lara attempts to ease any discomfort David might feel, in the presence of a Russian woman, at having aided the insurgency against the Soviets in Afghanistan. It is during this conversation that Lara invokes the idea that the US approach to Afghanistan was primarily about "revenge" and the opportunity to "give the Soviets their Vietnam" (Aslam 2008, 111). While Aslam represents this sentiment as engrained in Russian memory of the war, David seems to reject such motivations as belonging to a fringe element and certainly not part of what informed his actions. David admits that "it's possible that everyone else was fighting the Soviets for the wrong reasons, was mercenary or dishonest" (Aslam 2008, 111); he grudgingly acknowledges that some in his profession were "faking enthusiasm due to this or that greed" (Aslam 2008, 111).

Of course, David's commitment to opposing tyranny and oppression is made less impressive by his meek acknowledgement of "the mayhem" he "helped unleash" (Aslam

2008, 111). The destruction visited upon the civilian population in places like Afghanistan has manifested as a troubled conscience that David has learnt to "live with" in the decades since (Aslam 2008, 111). Significantly, David is not forced to elaborate on what he means by "mayhem"; the reader must independently extrapolate that he is referring to the emergence of warlords and groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. This evasive use of language is demonstrative of the ways in which cultural memory frames following the Cold War attempted to bolster American hegemony by obfuscating the violence perpetuated in Afghanistan—a tension between the often violent realities of American interventionalist policy and how America understands its role in geopolitics that is explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. Ultimately, we see that David has been able to hide behind limited memory frames and convince himself of the purity of his intentions. Aslam destabilises this version of cultural memory for both David and the reading audience via the introduction of younger characters whose lives have been shaped by the consequences of the Cold War in Afghanistan.

Post-9/11 Afghanistan: Casa, Dunia and James

A series of younger characters – Casa, Dunia and James – represent the generation that has inherited post-Cold War Afghanistan. Aslam crafts the latter half of the narrative so that they converge on Marcus' property to confront their elders with the consequences of conflict in the region and the dangers of perpetuating such conflict into the future.

Casa is the first representative of this younger generation to arrive at Marcus' house in Usha. We first meet Casa, though, while he is organising a suicide attack on a local school; as a result he is established as an extremist figure from the outset of the narrative. Raised in Madrassas and jihadi training camps along Pakistan's porous border with Afghanistan, Casa represents the perspective of those male Afghan children who, orphaned by Soviet invasion, found themselves drafted into extremist organisations like the Taliban. Casa's name, given to

him by a boy attending a Western-style school and impressed with his bravery, is significant in that it derives from "Gianconte Casabianca", the courageous son of a French Admiral who died, aged twelve, during Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (Khadem 2014, 192). Upon moving to an Islamic school, the boy regrets naming Casa in this way, rendering Casa's name, Amir Khadem argues, a "palimpsest, where the histories of Western colonialism and Islamic Fundamentalism meet" and "ecapsulat[ing] a seemingly indeterminate identity that is moulded out of clashes between the West and the non-West" (2014, 191).

Much like Lara and David, Casa has a particular understanding of the upset that has plagued Afghanistan in recent decades. For Casa, education was limited to lessons in bomb making and hatred of the West and Russia. At twenty-one years old in 2008, Casa is too young to remember Afghanistan as anything other than war torn; he has grown up surrounded by chaos and violence, living in the never-ending aftermath of the Cold War. Unlike the protagonists in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* Casa is not old enough to remember a time before brutality; he is, as Hosseini puts it, of "the generation of children whose ears knew nothing but the sound of bombs and gunfire" (Hosseini 2003, 34). This difference between Aslam's and Hosseini's characters highlights the gulf between the two projects. Hosseini opts to focus his narrative lens on a peaceful time, as if to emphasise that Afghans were capable of such stability; Aslam, uninterested in such framing, focuses his ire on the ways in which this stability was disallowed by international powers and has given way to chaos. For Casa, the only guiding principle in his life, as a result of this tumult, has been Islam and its teachings. Unfortunately, Casa's retreat into faith was made dangerous when his teachers sought to weaponise his dedication; they introduced a version of Islam manipulated to permit violence as a form of worship. As a result, Casa arrives at Marcus' home deeply suspicious of the West, America in particular, and determined to view his new acquaintances as potential enemies.

Contrary to his expectations, Casa is treated with hospitality and invited to eat with Marcus, David and Lara. His distrust for the West at the forefront of his mind, Casa sits at a distance "on the farthest chair from them, the one nearest the door" (Aslam 2008, 216). Marcus does not hesitate to open his home to the newcomer; he is not suspicious of Casa's injuries and appears determined to make his stay as comfortable as possible. We find Marcus "expressing worry about the perfume factory being too cold during the night" for Casa to sleep well (Aslam 2008, 216). Marcus also voices his intention to find a prayer mat for Casa to use during his stay. This show of kindness inspires Casa to express something in return, prompting the clash of cultural perspectives in the room to become explicit. Unused to affection or kindness in any form, Casa rather mechanically comes to the conclusion that he should "show them somehow that he too is mindful of their well-being" (Aslam 2008, 216). Unfortunately, this attempt at connection manifests as an ill-judged reference to the 9/11 attacks. Casa asks David if he is "from the USA" and if he "flew here" (Aslam 2008, 216). When David responds in the affirmative to both questions, Casa informs him that he should be "careful about flying" lest "the Jews repeat the attacks of 11 September 2001" (Aslam 2008, 216).

None of Casa's companions challenge his understanding of the attacks. Most notably, David "gets up suddenly and pours more tea into Marcus' cup" in silence (Aslam 2008, 216). Instances such as this do little to force David—or indeed the reading audience—to confront the damage done by Western, and specifically American, powers in Afghanistan. Faced with Casa's perspective here, David might be forgiven for feeling reluctant to examine his apathy or blindness toward the responsibility he bears for the state of Afghanistan; ill will toward America is something to which David has become accustomed as we see when he encounters walls in Kabul tagged with "*Death to America*" (Aslam 2008, 48, emphasis in original). Indeed, Casa is initially presented as an extremist whose robotic attempts at human

interaction make him easy to dismiss. As O'Gorman notes, Aslam has received criticism for Casa's characterisation (2015, 137). O'Gorman quotes Robin Yassin-Kassab as writing that "with his horrifyingly wrongheaded interpretations of Islam, [Casa] seldom rises above the stereotype" (2015, 137). However, as we will see, this stereotype is substantially undercut by Aslam's depiction of a conflicted young man who is not a mindless agent of destruction, but a traumatised product of his surroundings. With the introduction of Dunia—a local schoolteacher and a devout observer of moderate Islam—Aslam is able to reveal the extent to which Casa embodies Afghanistan's on-going national trauma.

Dunia arrives at Marcus' house seeking protection after she is accused of having a male visitor at her window while her father is away—a ploy on the part of local fundamentalists to "uproot" her school and punish her for perceived immodesty (Aslam 2008, 287). Despite the loss of her mother to a Soviet rocket attack, Dunia has not been enticed by radicalism; her relatively comfortable upbringing in Usha under the guidance of her one remaining parent insulated her childhood and diverted her from Casa's path. In adulthood, as an educated woman in a professional career, Dunia has been placed, ostensibly, beyond the reach of radical recruiters and inoculated against their warped versions of history. Even without these advantages, Dunia's gender would have likely disqualified her as a candidate for the training received by Casa. As such, Dunia is positioned within the narrative as the perfect foil to Casa; she simultaneously functions to reveal Casa as unrepresentative of the majority of Afghan citizens and render his trauma visible by allowing the reading audience to compare his damaged worldview to her own.

Casa and Dunia have a rather unique relationship at the house as the only native Afghans in attendance. They are thrown together several times a day by the Muslim call to prayer, sharing a mat and quietly observing each other at worship. During one of these prayer sessions, Dunia noticed that Casa had draped a blanket over his shoulders in such a way as to

leave it dangling perilously close to a nearby oil lamp. Upon finishing his prayers, Casa notices Dunia's anxious expression and asks why she looks "so frightened" (Aslam 2008, 317). Casa is touched and confused by Dunia's expression of concern for his safety; he cannot fathom feeling worry for a stranger in this way, saying "but you don't even know me" (Aslam 2008, 317). Impulsively, Dunia marks Casa's cheek with a "teardrop that has grains of kohl dissolved in it" (Aslam 2008, 318). She explains the gesture as an effort to "keep off the bad eye"—a custom whereby something is rendered "less perfect" so as to "stop the Djinn from coveting it" (Aslam 2008, 318). Casa understands the meaning behind Dunia's actions and is moved by her kindness. However, there is a tension in this exchange as we do not know enough of Casa to anticipate his reaction to the unsolicited touch of a woman.

Instead of responding with violence or aggression Casa feels compelled to speak honestly with Dunia and share something of himself with her. For the reader, this moment feels intensely private, almost intimate, in a way that encourages our perception of Casa as a traumatised individual with very limited capacity for emotional expression. "Looking overwhelmed", Casa begins to speak and falters, needing to start anew (Aslam 2008, 318); he eventually communicates "very quietly" to Dunia that he wishes he "didn't feel alone all the time" (Aslam 2008, 318). Dunia responds by asking Casa what he has done, intuitively recognising him as someone whose path in life has necessitated his isolation from genuine interaction with other people. In response, Casa "brings his hands forward and displays the palms" (Aslam 2008, 318). Perhaps sensing Dunia's confusion, he eventually utters "I hate America" with what is described as "a deliberation" before each word, adding emphasis and making the words "seem carefully chosen" (Aslam 2008, 318). With this, Dunia realises "that he is someone traumatised by the United States invasion" (Aslam 2008, 318); she perhaps interprets the connection between Casa's gesture and his words as an admission of having perpetrated violence against his enemy. Though Casa's trauma and resultant anger may go

back further than the post-9/11 invasion, Dunia correctly identifies the occupation as the driving force behind his current pursuit of violence.

Casa's fundamentalism is established through exchanges such as this, as O'Gorman puts it, as related to "an intimate network of social, political and historical contexts" (2015, 139). According to O'Gorman, we are encouraged here to "empathise with Casa" and recognise him as a "traumatised" and "rootless young man" (2015, 137). In situating Casa's extremism in this way, however, Aslam perhaps avoids dealing with the ways in which Casa is motivated by religion, specifically Islam. As O'Gorman suggests, such an approach "may potentially only *invert* the media Orientalism that" Aslam is "attempting to undercut" (2015, 140, emphasis in original). Addressing novels by Kamila Shamsie (*Burnt Shadows*, 2009) and Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2007) alongside *The Wasted Vigil,* O'Gorman acknowledges that in "opting to bypass any religious motivation for Islamist fundamentalism, one might argue that the novels do not fully respect the conscious agency of Muslims—Pakistani or otherwise—to choose to adhere to a worldview rooted in a distinctly religious kind of fundamentalism" (2015, 140). However, as we will see, Casa's characterisation as an extremist aggrieved by historical violence is not a denial of his religious devotion. Rather, as O'Gorman notes, Aslam declines to participate in an "engagement with the theology of Islamist fundamentalism" that may have contributed or "adhered too closely to narratives in which Islamist fundamentalism is often virtually inextricable from Pakistani or Muslim identity" (2015, 141). This differs substantially from Hosseini's depiction of Assef in *The Kite Runner,* discussed in Chapter 1 as problematic in its failure to account for any historical, political or religious motivation for destructive behaviours. Aslam's focus is instead more usefully trained on Casa as a complex character with motivations beyond those religious ones typically allowed for in Western discourse.

This effort is expanded as Dunia engages in more detail with Casa's motivations. Dunia attempts to reassure Casa that he need not "feel alone" in being afraid or confused by the state of the world but her words fall on deaf ears (Aslam 2008, 319). As has become his custom, Casa translates his feelings of vulnerability into anger and a determination to do harm. He tells Dunia that he and his cohorts will "destroy America the way the Soviet Union was destroyed" (Aslam 2008, 319). As Dunia begins to refute Casa's interpretation of world history, the significance of Aslam's decision to frame this section of the narrative in such a confined, almost claustrophobic manner becomes clearer. This conversation takes place entirely between the two Afghan characters, with no witnesses present from any other represented region in the novel. David, specifically, is not privy to this exchange despite Aslam's apparent interest in challenging his understanding of US foreign policy and its consequences. He is not exposed to Casa's concerns and is not afforded the same opportunity as Dunia to recognise the trauma at play and recalibrate his understanding of Casa's mindset. The narrative focuses entirely on Casa and Dunia, flitting backwards and forwards between them as they navigate this conversation. While this affords a sense of privacy that is essential for Casa to reveal his thoughts to Dunia in confidence and comfort, the price for this is that characters like David Town are not exposed to the trauma caused by US foreign policy.

Here, Aslam replicates the reality cultivated by Western governments and news media since 9/11. Unfortunately, Aslam seems to suggest, it is all too common for individuals like David to remain avid proponents of US foreign policy in places like Afghanistan without being exposed to the stories of people like Casa. This is largely due to the manipulation of media frames which are designed to exclude perspectives that might undercut the legitimacy of war or humanise the Other. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler writes that "throughout the Bush regime, we saw a concerted effort on the part of the state to regulate the visual field" (2009, 64). The practice of embedded reporting became commonplace during the invasion of

Iraq in March 2003 (Butler 2009, 64). As Susan L. Carruthers has noted, embedded reporting was an escalation of media policies implemented during 20th century wars; it was a strategy designed to control news stories from the outset so that "no retrospective 'fixing' was required" (2011, 225).

The significance of such reporting programmes during the early years of the 'war on terror' is explained in detail in the introduction to this thesis, though elements of its operation are useful to reiterate here as we unpack Aslam's framing of this exchange between Casa and Dunia. Roughly 600 reporters were embedded with troops during the Iraq War; most of these journalists were British or US citizens working with media corporations based in one of the coalition countries. As Butler describes, reporters were removed from the role of objective observer as they "travelled only in certain transports, looked only at certain scenes, relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action" (2009, 64). They were "offered access to the war only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of action" (Butler 2009, 64). This kind of reporting was implicitly designated the task of promoting the heroism of soldiers and shifting the focus away from the human cost of war. According to Heinz Brandenberg, embedding had the effect of creating a sense of camaraderie between journalists and troop units, thus lessening the likelihood of critical reporting on military activity in conflict zones (2005, 229). Significantly, such tight control over media reporting meant that little broadcast time was spent addressing the civilian impact of post-9/11 invasions.

There were, of course, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, exceptions to this mode of reporting; journalists like Robert Fisk (*Robert Fisk on Afghanistan: Osama bin Laden: 9/11 to Death in Pakistan*, 2016) and Patrick Cockburn (*The Age of Jihad*, 2016) in particular, alongside scholars like Judith Butler, have made serious efforts to highlight and undercut the limited views provided by embedded reporting. It is also important to note that

embedded journalism was not widely practised during the 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan. The diffuse nature of the conflict, mostly taking place in mountainous regions, was not conducive to such schemes. The terrain also dissuaded the majority of journalists from attempting to gain unilateral access to the conflict, thus lessening the need for robust systems of oversight. Ultimately, neither conflict embarked upon in the aftermath of 9/11 came to the public with the human cost of war at the forefront of journalistic endeavour. Whether this was achieved by calculation as in Iraq, or circumstance as in the case of Afghanistan, there was no persistent media rebuttal to the image of the suspicious Muslim Other that had come to dominate post-9/11 discourse.

In allowing us to bear witness to this scene between Casa and Dunia, Aslam attempts to undo the effects of this framing for the reading audience. As Dunia calmly reasons with Casa, we recognise her speaking from a marginalised perspective and countering media frames that deny the existence of a moderate, tolerant Islam. Dunia tells Casa that he need not worry about threats, Western or otherwise, to "obliterate Islam" because "Muslims love Islam" and this will ensure its survival (Aslam 2008, 319). We bear witness as Aslam, through Dunia, issues a direct challenge to all who view Islam as inherently dogmatic or combative, both in the West and within extremist communities. Dunia tells Casa that "Muslims hate fundamentalism" and as such "*that* can be destroyed" (Aslam 2008, 319, emphasis in original). She situates fundamentalist interpretations of Islam as perversions of her religion, insisting that those who promote dogma and violence are its greatest threat. Thus, while Aslam does not engage with or attempt to parse Casa's relationship with religion, he makes a deliberate effort to voice its opposite in Dunia. This can be read as a conscious attempt on Aslam's part to actively push back through Dunia against the framing of the 'war on terror' as the struggle of a virtuous Western world to combat a malevolent Islam. In this way, Aslam avoids making concessions, even implicit ones, to the premise that Islam and

violent extremism are, on some level, intrinsically linked by analysing whether religious devotion truly spurs Casa's behaviour and to what extent.

Confronted with Dunia's repulsion toward extremism, though, Casa "flinches" and "steps away", bringing an end to both his and Dunia's "trance" (Aslam 2008, 319). Casa wipes away the kohl smeared on his cheek and retreats to the comfort of his confrontational posture while Dunia recovers her senses and recognises her companion as one of those "men with nothing but passion where knowledge should be" (Aslam 2008, 319). These statements offer a glimpse into the mind-set of ordinary, moderate Muslims whose experience is frequently ignored or altogether erased in media discourse dominant in the West. It is, of course, significant that Aslam entrusts this moment of insight to a female character. In Dunia, we are offered another example of what I have signalled at various points throughout this chapter as Aslam's preoccupation with women as victims of oppression but also figures of resistance. In Aslam's characterisation of Dunia, Qatrina and Zameen we find a steadfast denial of Western framing that insists upon the reduction of Afghan women to helpless victims in need of rescue by a benevolent imperialism.

As Ayotte and Husain point out, post-9/11 representations of Afghan women centred around the veil as a garment that symbolised the evil of the Taliban's reign and lent humanitarian justification to the US invasion. Ayotte and Husain acknowledge that the Taliban did impose the wearing of the burqa upon Afghan women, the "smallest deviation in dress" often "met with public violence" (2005, 115). However, where the veil became a "visual and linguistic signifier of Afghan women's oppression" in the West there was little room for the consideration of women's agency (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 117). As Ayotte and Husain argue, the representation of covering as an oppressive, enforced practice functions to "homogenise an extraordinarily diverse population of Muslim women" with little "explication of the origins, variety, and underlying meanings of these practices that have

shifted across historically specific cultural contexts"—a history addressed by writers like Adhaf Soueif, whose work on this topic I explore further in Chapter 3 (2005, 117).

While the veil itself is not something explored in detail by Aslam, the contentious discourse surrounding covering practices provides us with a useful inroad into the depiction of gender, and gender-based oppression, in *The Wasted Vigil;* in many ways, the "rhetoric of the veil" encapsulates the demeaning and homogenising perspective on Afghan women that Aslam works to destabilise. As Ayotte and Husain point out, the burqa itself is not an inherently oppressive garment and was often used by Afghan feminists to provide "cover for smuggling books and supplies to a network of underground schools, cameras for documenting Taliban abuses, and women fleeing persecution" (2005, 117). It is this spirit of resistance that Aslam infuses in his female characters. Qatrina, as we have seen, is someone brutalised, physically and mentally, by the Taliban's reign and yet she is defiant right to the end of her life, running an illegal school with Marcus when she is finally caught by the Taliban and sentenced to death. Zameen, perhaps the character subjected to the most prolonged, visceral abuse—raped and exsanguinated by the Soviets and forced to give birth alone and in exile in the desert—retains her agency and determination throughout; when David meets Zameen she is working for a women's refugee agency in Jalalabad and it is, after all, *her* ghost that returns to Usha to frighten the Taliban from her family home. Dunia embodies much the same spirit of resistance; a teacher by vocation, Dunia's presence at Marcus' home is spurred by her refusal to give up teaching despite the pressure from local extremists. Echoing Qatrina's penchant for righteous dissent, Dunia is dedicated to education because, as her father fearfully puts it questioning her chosen career, "things have to change" and she must "be the one to change them" (Aslam 2008, 289).

Ultimately, we will continue to see, Aslam's female characters and their respective fates address the complexities of life for Afghan women in a fashion that refuses to minimise

either their suffering or their resilience. However, Dunia's work in undermining Casa's worldview here is a failure as his attitudes do not change. This perhaps serves Aslam's point as he opts not to gloss over the difficulty of the task faced by Afghan feminists as larger forces—international interference and extremism—continue to outstrip the efforts of women like Dunia, blithely perpetuating their suffering and rendering it noble but in vain.

For the reader, however, this exchange is sufficient to persuade us of the existence of a majority Muslim community committed to the virtues of moderate religious observation and a traumatised subset of the population driven to extremism by anger and frustration. However, it does little to alter the trajectory of the novel. Aslam's commitment to demonstrating the devastating effects of limited media frames means that this conversation is not permitted to find an audience beyond its participants. As the intimate bubble of the exchange bursts, the window for insight shuts and the narrative proceeds as though Casa's trauma and Dunia's treatise on moderate Islam had never been given narrative space.

In order for David Town to catch up to the reader—now alert to the harm caused by Western, and specifically American, hegemony—Aslam introduces James Palentine, the son of a now-deceased CIA colleague of David's during the Cold War, in Afghanistan as a member of an unspecified branch of the US defence forces operating in the country since the post-9/11 invasion. James functions to represent the end-result of decades of unchallenged rhetoric justifying violence against the Other; described by Frawley as "the young American extremist", James is Casa's counterpart in attitude and behaviour (2013, 454). One of James' first acts upon his arrival in the narrative is to reveal the fate suffered by Lara's brother following his defection from Soviet forces. As part of his duties in the region James has been working closely with local warlord Gul Rasool, a connection that hints at ongoing alliances between the US and convenient but dangerous local power brokers. Significantly, Naeem Inayatullah points out this rendering of regional warlords as a shortcoming in Aslam's text

(2013, 335). Inayatullah argues that whereas Casa is treated as a complex character whose extremism is explained in the context of ongoing violence and trauma, the warlords are more straightforwardly presented as "the shorthand for irreducible evil" (2013, 335). Gul Rasool in this instance is merely a convenient source of information for James, who discovers that Benedikt was captured by Afghan rebels and killed during a game of Buzkashi. This is a popular game in the region in which players mounted on horseback attempt to grab an animal carcass and deposit it in a goal, the carcass typically getting torn apart—as Benedikt was—during proceedings.

David is tasked with relaying this information to Lara, whose heartbreak upon hearing the news troubles him. We are told by the narrator that, left to his own devices, David would have arrogantly kept the information from Lara but Marcus' presence during this meeting with James made such secrecy impossible. A voice enters his consciousness unbidden and asks: "*Wouldn't you have wanted to learn what happened to Jonathan in Vietnam?*" (Aslam 2008, 368, emphasis in original). It is indicated to the reader via italics that this voice emerges not from the omniscient narrator but directly from David's struggling mind; it represents a new sense of awareness dawning for David. He is able to make the connection between Lara's trauma and his own; they are bound by the brothers they lost to the Cold War, even as they come from opposite sides of the conflict. David recognises Benedikt and Jonathan as equivalent losses and is therefore forced to recognise the humanity and grievability, in Butler's terminology, of those he has considered the enemy for decades. David comes to the conclusion that he and Lara lost loved ones to what was essentially the "same war", fought for the same reasons and with the same outcomes (Aslam 2008, 368). As Peter Morey puts it, Aslam's characters can be seen to confront the "essential links between them despite the separatist thrust of striving ideologies" (2018, 198). These realisations shake David's worldview as worrying connections between the conflicts of past and present begin

to appear, obvious now, before his eyes. David is able to see the relationship between the Cold War in Afghanistan and present-day conflicts as equal to "rivers of lava emerging onto the surface after flowing many out-of-sight miles underground" (Aslam 2008, 368). Significantly, David realises that James is the same age he was when he arrived in Afghanistan to fight against "America's enemy" (Aslam 2008, 368). The ease with which conflict is perpetuated from one generation to the next seems to hit David all at once as with dread he recognises Casa, Dunia and James as "the planet's future" (Aslam 2008, 368).

The last vestiges of David's prior ignorance are removed as James informs him of Zameen's fate—James's father and the CIA had permitted her murder at the hands of Gul Rasool because of her ties to David and a known communist. The omniscient narrator accesses David's recollection of the time in question to tell us of the "scattershot speculations, the collective urgency to grasp opportunities and exploit advantages, to bring the deadlock with the USSR to an end" (Aslam 2008, 384). Aslam's narrator seems to echo the harsh realisations dawning in David's mind as we are bluntly told that "this was about nations and ideals" and about "carrying the fire" (Aslam 2008, 386). Individual cruelties were regarded as insignificant; they were irrelevant when compared to the importance of the larger mission.

Faced with personal tragedy—an example of the human cost of war which he cannot rationalise or ignore—this justification collapses for David. We bear witness as Aslam allows Afghanistan's national trauma to bubble persistently to the surface, this time through characters rather than the physical setting of the novel, and the extent of the violence underpinning American, hegemony is revealed. Cultural memory insisting upon the benign nature of the Cold War is rendered untenable as the narrative champion of this version of history is forced to acknowledge the carelessness of the violence committed, even by his own hand. David tells Lara about his history with Zameen and about how, on the day of her

second disappearance, he had decided to let the communist boy from her childhood die in a Soviet bombing campaign. David knew that the boy was alive and had received word about the Soviet raid; he and other intelligence officials had decided not to evacuate the camp but to let "those men, women and children die to expose the brutality of the Soviets" (Aslam 2008, 391).

David rather weakly reiterates the rhetoric to which he has subscribed since the days of the Cold War as he tells Lara that they "were saving the future generations of Afghanistan and the world from communism" (Aslam 2008, 391). Lara does not argue with his assessment of the brutality of the Soviet regime, invoking the death of her cosmonaut father as evidence of the disregard for human life frequently demonstrated at the height of their power. Instead, Lara is positioned in this moment as a vessel for the ideas Aslam has been pushing David and the reader toward throughout the narrative. Lara compares David to her late husband Stepan who worked within the Soviet establishment and who "suffered from a kind of blindness" when it "came to his nation, his tribe" (Aslam 2008, 391). According to Lara, both men tended to consider brutality a part of "reality", while "principles" could be set aside when they interfered with whatever violence had to be borne (Aslam 2008, 392). As Lara confronts David with the futility of the destruction he and his Soviet counterparts have wrought in the name of their "myths", he is left pondering the possibility of "forgiveness" (Aslam 2008, 393).

Conclusion: A Shared Grave

In contrast to David's dawning awareness of the role America played in destabilising Afghanistan, James, in his post-9/11 bravado, is portrayed as a dangerously naïve individual who does not recognise the consequences of subscribing to divisive, inflammatory dogma. We witness the extent of James' misguided loyalty to the 'war on terror' as Dunia goes missing and Aslam's novel hurtles toward its conclusion. In an earlier confrontation

demonstrating wildly different interpretations of the conflict, James had contradicted Dunia when she insisted that the US forces are present in Afghanistan not for altruistic reasons but because of a desire for "retribution" (Aslam 2008, 376). Serving again as a mouthpiece for an under-represented moderate perspective, Dunia tells James that he is "as bad as" Casa (Aslam 2008, 376). In this way, Aslam draws a startling parallel between proponents of ideological agendas on both sides of the conflict and highlights the silenced majority helplessly caught in the middle. Both James and Casa take pride in dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to their cause and are dangerously unburdened by nuance or an awareness of the suffering they inflict. Notably, with Dunia's disappearance and presumed murder, all three Afghan women present in Aslam's narrative are dead at the hands of men—Afghan and American—for whom women are disposable pawns. However, in each case, as we have seen, these disappeared women remain to haunt the narrative, their absence jarring and consequential. In the case of Qatrina and Zameen, this is a literal haunting, reminding characters and the reader alike of their presence via books nailed to ceilings and ghostly apparitions. For Dunia, though, her lingering presence in the narrative as an unresolved disappearance drives the story toward its final crescendo.

As Casa searches for Dunia at Gul Rasool's mansion, he meets James and engages in a final confrontation in which the dangers of James' attitudes are made clear. David, having also come to search for Dunia, arrives at the mansion to find Casa "on his back in the centre of the room" with his legs and arms pinned to the ground by James' various associates (Aslam 2008, 409). Shockingly, we are told that one of the men "is holding a blowtorch, its blue jet directed into Casa's left eye" (Aslam 2008, 409). David is enraged by the sight of Casa in agony, his "mouth open in a twisted soundless scream" as his eye erupts "in black blood" (Aslam 2008, 410). David's anger is not quelled when he hears that Casa has confessed to associations with Nabi Khan and revealed details of a raid planned for the

following night. David is no longer able to justify brutality in the name of ideology; he is able to appreciate the full horror and the potential consequences of the violence occurring in this room. Significantly, we see David struggle with lingering militaristic patriotism as he refuses to accept that James' actions are sanctioned by any US agency, questioning whether he is in fact "an employee of the United States government" (Aslam 2008, 412). The fact that James' cavalier attitude toward torture does reflect US policy of the 'war on terror' is explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

For James, the righteousness of his cause has allowed him to ignore any moral misgivings that might ordinarily inhibit such conduct. So pure are his ideals—and so thorough is Casa's dehumanisation—that violence of this degree is no crime at all. James confirms for the reader the extent to which he has internalised binary thinking promoted by post-9/11 rhetoric; he tells David that the battle is not between "him and me" but rather "them and us" (Aslam 2008, 411). James does not see Casa as an individual, much less a young man whose worldview has been warped by trauma and whose potential has been forfeited to groups willing to take advantage of his pain and anger for their own purposes. Further, James does not see himself as playing a role in the perpetuation of such dynamics. The omniscient narrator intervenes to point out that young men like Casa "don't need to watch jihadi DVDs to become radicalised" because they find sufficient outrage in the "evening news on the TV with things like these being reported" (Aslam 2008, 412). However, the dangers of igniting more anger in regions like Afghanistan does not seem to register with James, no more than it did with David twenty years earlier. For James, there is no risk of making matters worse because in his view "they are the children of the devil" and they "have no choice but to spread destruction in the world" (Aslam 2008, 413).

Ultimately, this belief in the complete Otherness of Casa and Afghans in general is important to James' ability to excuse his participation in atrocity. James tells David to "look

at the devastation all around" (Aslam 2008, 413). He parrots cultural memory frames which deny the role of the Cold War and American interference in the cultivation of Afghanistan's misery and conveniently deposits the blame at the feet of the Afghan people who have "reduced their own country to rubble" (Aslam 2008, 413). In this way, Aslam situates James as the perfect representative for the ways in which American hegemony has excused violence against Afghans. James does not acknowledge the role the US has played in creating young men like Casa or in cultivating a volatile socio-political environment in Afghanistan. Shifting his focus from Afghans as responsible for their own destruction to Muslims more generally being to blame—the two identities indistinct and interchangeable for James—he asserts that "none of it" is the fault of the international community that spent decades tearing Afghanistan apart, killing "hundreds" in "bombing raids" or running "Guantanamo Bay and other prisons" (Aslam 2008, 414); instead "Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and their Islam are answerable for all that" (Aslam 2008, 414). For James, Islam is simply incompatible with civilisation; as Aslam has demonstrated, he has been deliberately sheltered from perspectives that might offer a challenge to such limited and dehumanising understandings of a complex and diverse religious community. James is instead allowed to maintain a sense of righteous anger, un-tempered by the traumatised voices screaming from the periphery and going unheard.

As Aslam's novel ends, the consequences of this ignorance are revealed. As Casa leaves with "ash" in the "cindered socket" of his eye and James insists that "we are just defending ourselves against them", Aslam presents a microcosm of the ideological intransigence that perpetuates cycles of extremism (Aslam 2008, 414). Casa is next seen among "two rows" of boys "bending toward Allah" in preparation for a night raid on Usha (Aslam 2008, 418). Casa has not been dissuaded from violent extremism by his experience at James' hand; this added trauma has merely served to strengthen his resolve against a Western society that has proven itself, in Casa's experience, capable only of violence and

maltreatment of those deemed the enemy. Once again, Aslam deliberately positions Casa's extremism here as a consequence of his circumstances and experiences, not emerging, as James understands it, from within as a mindless compulsion to wreak destruction. Ultimately, the possibility of Casa's rehabilitation is unexplored within the narrative; James' brutality and refusal to acknowledge Casa as a fellow human-being precludes the possibility that violence might be diffused by cross-cultural understanding.

Instead, Aslam allows the violence to escalate, mirroring the effects of real-world cycles of violence and radicalisation. David makes one final attempt to halt the chain reaction set in motion by James' cruelty; he grabs Casa and clamps one hand over his mouth while holding him still with the other. Lara watches helplessly as David attempts to reason with Casa—to persuade him not to fulfil the expectations of people like James. The narrator tells us that David is "hoping to win over his murderer with an embrace" (Aslam 2008, 422); he is attempting to step in and undo the damage wrought by a thoughtless generation of self-righteous warriors whose cause he helped establish. However, David is unsuccessful and Casa gains access to his detonator. We are told that the "blast opens a shared grave for them on the ground" (Aslam 2008, 423).

Aslam's novel thus comes to a close with no cathartic release for the reading audience. Casa is not reformed; David is not allowed to be the hero whose last-minute intervention signals his redemption. Both men die and more blood seeps into the ground in Usha to be witnessed and mourned by those left behind. Lara arrives back at Marcus' house covered in blood and grief-stricken. We are told that Lara "wouldn't bathe in the house" as she "rejected the idea of the drain", not wanting their blood to wash away into oblivion (Aslam 2008, 425). Instead, Lara opts to wash her clothes, and herself, in the lake so that "all the redness would become part of the roaming water" and the "sun-dazzled surface" (Aslam 2008, 425). Lara ensures that David and Casa become part of the lore of the house; their

blood is left to permanently taint the water just like Qatrina's books mark the ceilings and the Taliban's bullets scar the walls.

In the midst of this quiet moment of memorialisation, Marcus is conscious of the war beginning to rage in Usha as the night raid succeeds in igniting chaos. Marcus hears "rockets", "gunfire" and imagines the beginnings of "street fighting in the sewers and alleys of Usha" (426). The narrator succinctly remarks that the "heroes of East and West are slaughtering each other in the dust of Afghanistan" (Aslam 2008, 426). This concept is not new to Marcus and he expresses no shock or dismay at the turmoil. In fact, this instance of direct engagement seems to come as a relief to a man who has spent decades watching as the two sides carefully circled one another, taking swipes whenever the opportunity arose and growing in anger and resentment. Marcus is not glad at the prospect of death or suffering, but if there must be conflict he longs for a situation where "the tears of one side are" are "fully visible to the other" (Aslam 2008, 426). As Marcus ponders the coming war, Aslam's primary narrative ends. The final image is of Marcus pushing the canoe David and Casa built together during their time at the house out onto the lake. Marcus watches as the boat "takes on an increasing amount of water and eventually disappears"—an apt representation of the mutually destructive influence of the two cultures (Aslam 2008, 426).

We then leap forward an unspecified number of years to find Marcus watching as the Buddha statue is air-lifted out of the factory by American soldiers helping to transport it to Kabul. We are told that Marcus' house "was officially designated an annexe of Kabul museum, a dozen or so visitors managing to make the trip to the house every year to see the colossal Gandhara sculpture" (Aslam 2008, 430). At first this image seems designed to provide the reader with hope that stability has arrived in Usha at last. However, this hope is not allowed to take root as we are told that Dunia was never found and that the school remained shut in her absence. It is set to re-open soon under new leadership but not under the

peaceful conditions we might desire to see after bearing witness to so much suffering. Though Nabi Khan's night raid was unsuccessful in gaining control of Usha for the warlord, it precipitated a period of more concentrated conflict and unrest in the region. Unfortunately, the violence was not of the cathartic kind that Marcus' had desired. Instead, American soldiers became embroiled in a fire fight and called in aerial assistance, making it so that the violence was more impersonal and detached than ever before. James Palentine is not mentioned in these final sections; he is not redeemed or made to witness the destruction engendered by his dehumanisation of Afghan civilians. Instead, James is rendered irrelevant—the question of his redemption inconsequential—as scores of replacements, all products of the same rhetoric, wade in to exacerbate Afghanistan's troubles.

Aslam does not offer a wish-fulfilling glimpse into what Afghanistan might have become had people like James been exposed to the mistakes of their forefathers; he does not give names to—or put kind words in the mouths of—a generation of young soldiers who have seen the dangers of dogma and its role in radicalisation and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. Dunia and Casa, and countless more like them, die unwitnessed and un-mourned by the international community—they die in vain. Aslam's true success in this novel lies in his ability to engage the audience in the tragedy of global ignorance to such senseless death and suffering.

Ultimately, Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* is most powerful in its dedication to grim realism at the expense of catharsis; Aslam forces us to reckon with the consequences of the status quo. Literature such as this does not seek to be a stand-alone solution, but rather a medium which can hold up a mirror to post-9/11 discourse and reveal its most dangerous pitfalls. It does this not in the interest of facilitating privileged Western readers in cursory engagement with some non-specific Other, but in an effort to encourage genuine accountability for suffering that might otherwise remain invisible. With this goal in mind, it becomes clear

why we find Marcus alone at his house in Usha at the novel's end, presiding over a property which is now quite literally a museum to all he has lost and all the trauma Afghanistan has been forced to bear: a happy ending would have allowed for the reader to walk away unchallenged by the plight of the community described, absolved from any call to action. Clinging to hope which the reading audience cannot fathom as realistic, Marcus' continues his vigil as the novel closes; he is setting out to meet someone who "could be Zameen's son" (Aslam 2008, 434). We are left with this final image of a bereft man whose hope for the future has been reduced to the possibility of catching up to a likely ghost. In this way, Aslam confronts us with the devastating consequences of continued inaction and ideological entrenchment; he compels readers to regard with suspicion rhetoric which does not acknowledge the existence of sites in places like Afghanistan where people and landscapes have been shaped by indelible trauma.

As we will see, this project is expanded in 2013's follow-up novel *The Blind Man's Garden* as Aslam moves away from tracing the ills and consequences of Afghanistan's traumatic 20th century to chronicling present-day tragedies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Chapter 3, I explore Aslam's treatment of mourning—a paralysing and sometimes dangerous state in places where loved ones have been spirited away to US-run prison camps—in the context of deepening global conflict in the decade since 9/11.

3

Haunted Communities: Tracing the Ghosts of the 'War on Terror' in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*

"There are no innocent people in a guilty nation."

Nadeem Aslam (*The Blind Man's Garden* 6)

Introduction

Early in his fourth novel *The Blind Man's Garden,* British Pakistani author Nadeem Aslam declares that there are "no innocent people in a guilty nation" (2013a, 6). The sentiment is, of course, pulled directly from the post-9/11 political climate. In the days and weeks after the attacks, US President George W. Bush announced on numerous occasions that the nations of the world faced a choice; they could either align themselves with the US or with 'the enemy' in the conflict that would come to be known as the 'war on terror'. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed in 2001 and 2003 respectively ravaged these nations and set the scene for the decade and a half of discord that has followed since. As Anne McClintock and others have noted, President Bush launched a war against the concept of terror, a war that, by definition, could not be won (2009, 51); this fact did not dissuade its pursuant parties, but instead encouraged an aggressive approach, heedless of mounting casualties.

Aslam's blunt phrasing in referring to "guilty nations" speaks to the truth of what happened in the years following the attacks of 11 September 2001 as innocence was

disallowed conceptually in countries where the full horror of war became a reality. This horror did not impact the civilian populations of belligerent Western nations; as has become typical since the conflicts of the late 20th century, these wars were fought far from Western soil so that the 'guilty people' could continue to be regarded as the unknown and unknowable Other.

In *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013a), Aslam seeks to undermine this sense of abstraction and give voice to those marginalised by post-9/11 rhetoric: this novel thus follows up *The Wasted Vigil* (2008). As in *The Wasted Vigil,* Afghanistan features as a centre of conflict, though the setting also extends to Pakistan, where the text begins and ends. The novel follows "almost-brothers" Mikal and Jeo as they journey from the small, fictional village of Heer, Pakistan into Afghanistan in October 2001 to offer medical aid to those injured in the erupting conflict (Aslam 2013a, 14). The young men are immediately captured by the Taliban, resulting in Jeo's death and the beginning of Mikal's ordeal as he is bartered between warlords and eventually sold as a terrorist to the Americans. Meanwhile, in Heer, Mikal and Jeo's family mourn their loss and deal with extremism in their own community.

In this chapter I examine *The Blind Man's Garden* as a novel that gives narrative space to the stories of those people in "guilty nations" whose innocence has been denied and indeed stolen by the violence inflicted in support of Western, and more specifically American, hegemony since 9/11. Focusing on the plight of marginalised communities, the novel addresses worsening ideological intransigence across the globe, reflecting on the 'war on terror' in light of more than a decade of ongoing conflict. Through the narrative, we come to understand the processes through which Afghanistan was rendered a "missing" space—in Jenny Edkins' terminology—after 9/11 as Aslam depicts the systematic denial of personhood that occurred in that region following the invasion of US-led coalition forces (2014, 129). I discuss Aslam's two-pronged approach to cataloguing suffering in this region, focusing

firstly on his foray into Afghanistan, where the brutality of the American-run prison camps is revealed. Drawing on Agamben, I examine Aslam's portrayal of the prisoner experience as a depiction of "bare life" (1998, 6)—a narrative approach that demonstrates the ways in which innocent individuals are stripped of their humanity and, as McClintock notes, produced as the enemy and "conjured into legal ghosts" (2009, 67). Secondly, I examine Aslam's representation of those haunted peripheral spaces—removed, as in Pakistan, from the immediate danger of the warzone—where the quiet but chaotic work of mourning continues unwitnessed long after a nearby conflict has ended. Despite the novel's awareness of growing resistance to cross-cultural understanding, Aslam's commitment to giving voice to the marginalised perspective manifests nonetheless forcefully here as he employs the fantastical and the spectral to communicate the depth of suffering engendered by post-9/11 geopolitical events.

9/11, Trauma and Worsening Global Relations—Aslam's Response

The attacks of 11 September 2001 were framed as an instance of national trauma within the United States, as has already been discussed. The state, charged with the protection of the citizenry in return for authority, had failed in its duty. In *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, and Law,* Lucy Bond traces the impact of the attacks on American memorial culture examining the narrative paradigms that have determined their representation within the varied realms of culture, politics, and law. Bond describes the traumatic awakening to what Edkins, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics,* terms the "illusion of security" as "a moment of national unhoming" (2015, 52). Alongside this "unhoming", a simultaneously emergent understanding of the attacks as a collective wound meant that they could be harnessed to strengthen the bond between the citizenry and the state during the process of recovery (Bond 2015, 52). However, the more dangerous ideological shift in the wake of 9/11 came in the form of a rejuvenated interest in narratives of American

exceptionalism and triumphalism. According to Bond, exceptionalism is the American nation's "most fundamental, and indeed foundational mythology" (2015, 54); she draws on Donald Pease's work on *New American Exceptionalism* to define this exceptionalism as a "lasting belief in America as the fulfilment of the national idea to which other nations aspire" (Bond 2015, 54). In other words, America understands itself as a realised ideal—a nation that self-identifies within the international community as a singular beacon for liberty and democracy. As pointed out by Richard Hughes, notions of exceptionalism allow for a disregard for history, or a sense of immunity from its various accusations and demands (cited in Bond 2015, 54). For Hughes, America is a "peculiarly amnesiac nation" that views itself as "removed" from human history and therefore innocent of the failings and misdeeds that plague the history of other nations (cited in Bond 2015, 54).

National myths such as these aim to create a consensus into which all disruptions can be absorbed and neutralised. Foundational violence—whether the war of independence, slavery, or genocide of Native Americans—as well as the violence that sustains American dominance abroad in the present day is folded into a pre-existing understanding of the nation that pre-emptively disarms accusations of wrongdoing. Where the national myth can be seen to falter—in times of crisis when the nation is revealed as vulnerable and decidedly not exempt from global instability—the broader "fantasy" of exceptionalism steps in to cover the shortfall (Bond 2015, 55). Drawing again on Pease, Bond explains that "fantasies might […] be seen as the interim ideological mechanism that facilitates the reassertion of state power in the aftermath of traumatic loss" (2015, 55). The fantasy of exceptionalism operates in moments of crisis, fear and rupture as "a transcendent national mythology able to reconnect the (horrific) present to the (heroic) past and reopen the prospect of a glorious future" (Bond 2015, 55).

As Bond points out, this process of encountering and then neutralising disaster is integral to the survival of the United States as a formidable superpower. Bond invokes the work of various theorists to suggest that a sense of impending "calamity" is necessary for the maintenance of systems of power (2015, 56). In particular, Kevin Rozario argues that "calamity in the American imaginary" lays "the cultural groundwork for the expansion of a powerful national security apparatus" (cited in Bond 2015, 54). It follows that a society that simultaneously views itself as exceptional and under siege—often because of that very exceptionality—would consent to, or deem necessary, a security infrastructure that would seem outsized in any other context. Further, as both Bond and Rozario argue, the preoccupation with destruction and crisis in American culture is linked to visions of "redemptive catastrophe" where disasters are regarded as containing within them the potential for "moral, political and economic renewal" (cited in Bond 2015, 56).

It is clear, then, how terrorist attacks like those seen on 11 September 2001 could do little to diminish America's understanding of itself as an exceptional nation. While the sight of planes hitting the Twin Towers of course unsettled a nation and a Western world used to security and near immunity from global violence, the conceptual apparatus was already in place to deal with the fallout and absorb the attacks into the national mythology. Multiple framing devices could be employed to begin the process of neutralising the trauma of the attacks. As detailed in the introduction to this thesis, Bond's study of post-9/11 American rehabilitation relies on a discussion of the jeremiad—a literary genre defined by its use of mournful prose to lament the current state of society. In American consciousness, the jeremiad as a form is used to elevate moments of crisis to the realm of the divine—as tests handed down to try the worthy (Bond 2015, 56). Bond also invokes memory theorists like Astrid Erll to describe the ways in which "existing narrative templates" can "be conscripted to structure the representation of new and unfamiliar occurrences" (59). If the mythic

understanding of America as the beleaguered, chosen nation was to be re-asserted, then a worthy adversary had to be identified to fit into the role of fantasy villain. As Anne Whitehead has noted in *Trauma Fiction*, the invocation of familiar memory frames is important to the process of shaping public opinion (2004, 43). In the aftermath of 9/11, as the drive to invade Afghanistan and exact revenge intensified, the complex history of American, and of course Russian, presence in the country during the Cold War was obscured in order to maintain familiar memory frames of America as a singularly benevolent world leader.

As detailed in Chapter 2, the realities of Afghan suffering during this period were omitted from memory frames imposed after the attacks in an American context. The events of 11 September 2001 were posited as occurring at a remove from history; they were isolated acts of aggression by barbarous, violence-bent villains against an innocent superpower whose only crime was its exceptionality as a global beacon of freedom. As already explained, the invasion of Afghanistan was not an obvious reaction to this upset. Derek Gregory points out that none of the hijackers were Afghan (2004, 50-51). Further, given that "al-Qaeda is part of a distributed network of loosely articulated groups supposedly operating in over 40 countries" the invasion was an attempt by the US and its Western allies to "territorialise" an enemy that it could then be seen to defeat (Gregory 2004, 50-51). As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the framing of the US as reluctant but resigned crusader for global justice also eased the way for a long-desired invasion of Iraq, a country that, while led by a violent dictator, was not involved in the 9/11 attacks.

Aslam's approach to this context in *The Blind Man's Garden* is undoubtedly shaped by his own experience; Aslam was born in Pakistan in 1966 and emigrated to Britain with his family at age fourteen. According to Tahir Abbas, the attacks of 11 September 2001 as well as the London bombings of July 2005 increased the animosity felt toward the immigrant community in Britain, specifically those who emigrated from Muslim majority countries like

Pakistan. Muslims became increasingly regarded as the "enemy-within", Abbas notes, deploying Margaret Thatcher's inflammatory phrase to indicate the extent of the cultural split (2007, 7). Aslam's earlier novel*, Maps for Lost Lovers,* addresses a specifically British context and demonstrates an acute awareness of these tensions that has also manifested in later work; published in 2004, the novel follows a Pakistani community in a small English town. Aslam's characters confront issues of community, nationality and religion as they navigate the cultural norms of their adopted country. The novel traces the cross-generational tensions engendered by this pressure as younger members in particular are forced to assimilate and abandon the culture to which their elders wish to cling. While seldom addressed directly, the suspicion with which such immigrant communities are treated in Britain and Western Europe nevertheless informs the behaviour and anxiety of Aslam's characters, creating an intimate portrait of the effects of Islamophobia in 21st century-Britain. Aslam has described *Maps for Lost Lovers* as his "immigrant novel", a portrayal of "the Pakistani immigrant community in Britain" that he came to see as having been "well advanced on the path that would lead to the suicide bombings on July 7, 2005" (cited in Frawley 2013, 443). In this novel Aslam acknowledges what Abbas describes as the tendency "throughout much of the Western world" to group Muslims together and ostracise them as "overly demanding of their religious and cultural rights, and as people unwilling to integrate into majority society" – assumptions in line with post-9/11 framings dealing with Muslims as an ideological monolith, incapable of diverse thought or exerting agency beyond the dictates of their religion (Abbas 2007, 7).

For some of Aslam's contemporaries, Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns, And the Mountains Echoed)* for example, a desire to appeal to a Western audience in this context has resulted in what has been read as a smoothing-out of those non-Western cultures featured in their novels. Hosseini, as seen in Chapter 1, offers a depiction of

Afghan society that places a considerable emphasis on secular characters, at times presenting their attitudes toward religion, gender and minor considerations like alcohol as representative of the nation as a whole. The prioritisation of these characters and attitudes is effective in that it encourages recognition of the humanity of Afghan people; of course, this comes, at times, at the expense of recognition of the humanity of those sections of the population that subscribe to beliefs not as acceptable or familiar to a Western reading audience. Characters with extremist tendencies—or even moderate, though devout, religious leanings—are either absent or marginalised as outliers that should not factor in an understanding of the country's demographics.

Though none of Aslam's earlier novels could be accused of similar levels of deference to an assumed Western perspective, *The Blind Man's Garden* departs still further from this mould, a fact which we might attribute to its emergence into a particularly fraught cultural context. In Chapter 2 I explained, following Frawley, the ways in which Aslam can be regarded as a global novelist "whose work not only goes beyond the boundaries of their 'home' nation, but who is also concerned with global processes of war and migration, and with globalization generally" (2013, 442). Though *The Blind Man's Garden* sees Aslam return to Pakistan as a primary setting for the first time since his debut novel *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), in this novel he takes on a determinedly globalised perspective in his treatment of global conflict in the post-9/11 era. Asked in an interview about the impetus behind the novel, Aslam stated that he was inspired by the extraordinary decade "beginning with 9/11 and ending with the Arab Spring" (Aslam 2013c). This decade has, of course, seen an intensification of global violence quite beyond anything that could have been anticipated in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, or indeed that which Aslam himself could have predicted in 2008 upon finishing *The Wasted Vigil.* In the same interview, Aslam listed some of the significant events that drew him to the themes featured in *The Blind Man's Garden.* These

included “the call to jihad” that followed the invasion of Afghanistan; the ‘war on terror’; the prison camps at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib; and the “finding and killing of Osama bin Laden” (Aslam 2013c).

All of these events encompassed, for Aslam, a clash “between an incomplete understanding of the East and an incomplete understanding of the West” (Aslam 2013c). In this sense, Aslam’s effort in this novel to record the silenced perspectives of those victimised by the ‘war on terror’ is significantly broader in focus than in *The Wasted Vigil.* Moving between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Aslam does not extensively excavate the colonial history of one particular space, pulling threads that connect such pasts to present-day conflict—though such histories are acknowledged. Instead, I argue, Aslam targets the ways in which the violence of the ‘war on terror’ manifests against communities and individuals beyond the confines of territories subjected to official invasion. Though Aslam casts both parties in this East/West divide as ignorant, this novel is largely preoccupied with the dearth of understanding, or indeed empathy, apparent in the West regarding suffering in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Specifically, Aslam points to the language used to obfuscate the scale of violence inflicted upon these regions as part of the ‘war on terror’. He remarks on “strategic strikes” that killed dozens and the reality that for every “one militant” eliminated by the CIA and drones, a further “forty-nine innocent people” are being murdered in Pakistan (Aslam, 2013c).

Journalist Patrick Cockburn concurs with Aslam’s assessment of the disproportionate impact of American military power upon non-Western spaces in this era. In *Age of Jihad* Cockburn refers to the 9/11 attacks as the “starting pistol for a series of calamitous events that destroyed the old status quo” (2016, 2); further, the events of 11 September 2001 precipitated “US military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, actions which transformed the political, sectarian and ethnic landscape of the region and released forces, the power of which

went beyond anything imagined at the time" (Cockburn 2016, 2). The fault-lines that emerged as the decade proceeded in what Cockburn refers to as the "Arab and Islamic worlds" had an undeniable impact in Western Europe as the effects of global instability began to be felt among immigrant communities (2016, 2). Pondering the increasing tension in Muslim communities within European cities, Tahir Abbas notes that the "war on terror has revealed itself to be an ideological construction, helping to maintain the status quo, while Muslims are derided, misrepresented, incarcerated and, in general, made to feel they are unwelcome" (2007, 7).

As such, with *The Blind Man's Garden,* Aslam addresses a climate of increasing instability wherein non-Western, and in particular Muslim, communities bear the brunt of global violence. It is a more combative text than even *The Wasted Vigil*, dealing with the insidious nature of present-day international relations rather than the grand historical narratives that mainly preoccupied its predecessor. Though set in 2008, the year of its publication, *The Wasted Vigil* traced the ways in which the international community had routinely interfered in and then abandoned Afghanistan for over a century. Aslam gathered a cast of characters representing those regions that had the most influence upon Afghanistan's history: a British doctor long-settled in Afghanistan; a Russian woman whose brother fought there during the Cold War; and an American man who spent years working in the region with the CIA. Aslam takes each of these characters to task and challenges their understanding of the role that the international community has played in perpetuating Afghan suffering over decades. As the novel progresses, Aslam challenges cultural memory frames that exclude the present-day effects of Afghanistan's traumatic history. To this end, a group of younger characters are introduced, including a young Afghan man with ties to extremist organisations and a US military operative whose commitment to the 'war on terror' is unshakeable. Ultimately, Aslam denies the reader any cathartic resolution to the novel; his younger

characters do not recognise their role as the "planet's future" and seek to halt patterns of violence (Aslam 2008, 368). Instead, Aslam allows their worst instincts to prevail, culminating in the detonation of a suicide vest and a renewed influx of American troops in the region. In this way, Aslam demonstrates for his reading audience the ways in which continued blind loyalty to tribal allegiances over cross-cultural understanding will inevitably exacerbate global violence and unrest.

However, though *The Wasted Vigil* marked a departure from the type of post-9/11 literature aimed at endearing Afghanistan to Western readers, it still dealt with Afghan suffering primarily as it related to Western political discourse on the 'war on terror' with a focus on the responsibility of colonial powers for ongoing suffering. Aslam's task in this earlier novel was to represent an Afghan society attempting to deal with generations' worth of trauma visited upon them by the international community. Thus, while the novel makes no explicitly compromising appeals for empathetic understanding among a Western readership, it nevertheless, almost by default, privileges the reader seeking enlightenment on the history of conflict in a region brought to the attention of post-9/11 society. Aslam's confrontational approach to describing Afghan history demands that Western readers recalibrate their understandings of British, America and Russian involvement in cultivating the conditions necessary for extremism to flourish. *The Wasted Vigil* is thus an unapologetically political novel that unpacks decades of rhetoric and memory frames that pay little attention to the contexts of colonial occupation and the damage wrought by the Cold War.

Inevitably, the focus in *The Wasted Vigil* on the West and Russia as perpetrators, though effective in destabilising post-9/11 rhetoric, has the effect of diminishing the space given to marginalised stories. Aslam redresses this shortcoming in *The Blind Man's Garden,* a novel that places experiences underrepresented in Western discourse front and centre. Importantly, it sustains the effort made in *The Wasted Vigil* to depict the region as a space

historically acted upon by international powers, but with a view to representing a group of non-Western characters as the main agents of the text. Aslam's earlier novel contained a mere four Afghan characters of significance; two of these were murdered by Soviet and American forces—itself an important comment on international interference in the region—while the two living Afghan characters were largely present to comment upon present-day occupation of the region. Casa, the young Afghan man with extremist leanings, and Dunia, a moderate schoolteacher, fulfil their function within the narrative; they embody the diversity of thought in Afghanistan on religious and political matters. However, insight into their inner lives is limited to their perspectives on Islam and terrorism; at times it seems as though they are present only to act as foils to their American and Russian counterparts and fill in the gaps left by cultural memory frames promoted in the West.

The local characters depicted in *The Blind Man's Garden* are not restricted in this way. Instead, we are presented with a range of characters from across Pakistani society, representing a spectrum of religious devotion, age, political affiliation and attitudes toward extremism. The narrative is anchored in Heer, a fictional Pakistani village, by Rohan—a former teacher, devout Muslim and widower—and his extended family that includes Mikal and Jeo. Other featured characters include a local extremist sect now run out of Ardent Spirit, the school founded years before by Rohan. Afghan characters, as we will see, are pointedly absent from the narrative in a manner that foregrounds, rather than obscures, their marginalisation on the world stage. Significantly, few Western characters feature and none are given voice within the narrative as figures of any influence. Westerners, specified frequently as white, populate prison staffs and army convoys, existing as strange and foreign creatures with penchants for brutality, demonstrating few redeeming characteristics. Aslam's narrative focus here is in making space for those marginalised communities that continue to

suffer under the ‘war on terror’. Thus Western characters have no particular use as protagonists and are excluded.

In fact, in this fourth novel Aslam goes further than simply refusing to court the Western reader through the representation of Western characters as protagonists—he actively seeks the alienation of the former from the narrative. Aslam’s previous novels addressing the post-9/11 context and issues around immigration—*The Wasted Vigil* and *Maps for Lost Lovers,* respectively—have been written in English, and though obviously translated as needed for other markets, the narrative is assumed to proceed largely in that language, unless specified otherwise, due to the presence of British and American characters or settings in predominantly English-speaking Western countries. The absence of such characters and settings from *The Blind Man’s Garden* means that this assumption no longer holds; the narrative was produced by its author in English, but the characters communicate with one another in various languages including Pashto and Urdu. This translation is not something that Aslam highlights throughout the narrative; rather, it emerges as a jarring reminder of difference at key points. One instance in particular finds Mikal attempting to communicate with an American soldier whom he is holding captive. Mikal, searching for a lost friend, summons his limited knowledge of English to demand information. He continually shouts “vere iz ze gurl?” at the soldier, growing increasingly frustrated at his limited ability to effectively interrogate his captive (Aslam 2013a, 349). In this instance, to which we will return later, we realise that, of course, Mikal has not actually been speaking English up to this point. The presumption of the pre-eminence of Western European languages is unceremoniously revoked here as Aslam leaves a Western reader in the rather uncomfortable position of identifying with the soldier, an antagonistic presence. Similar language barriers are erected during other portions of the novel, most notably at an American prison camp

where the officers scream and threaten violence in an English that, passed through the filter of a frightened prisoner, is made to read as the language of a strange and threatening Other.

Aslam's use of language in this way emphasises the cultural divide at play and ensures that a Western reader is abruptly alienated at critical points from the protagonist. In *The Blind Man's Garden,* we find a text, and an author, whose capacity or inclination to cater to the West is diminished by the persistent intensification of global violence and the ongoing dominance of Western media frames, to the exclusion of all other voices and perspectives. The novel is thus an act of disobedience depicting a community marginalised in the post-9/11 context, not seeking to achieve acceptance or understanding from a Western reader, but rather to provide narrative space and agency to those individuals silenced in Western media frames, placing the emphasis on their victimhood over the question of Western responsibility for suffering experienced in these regions. As noted in Chapter 2, Aslam has attained a wealth of critical success, shortlisted for numerous literary awards and named a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. However, in a recent interview Aslam expressed that he likes "to be on the margins" because he believes "the job of a writer is to be a voice that is not the majority voice" (Zakaria 2017). In *The Blind Man's Garden,* Aslam maintains this dedication to the subordinated perspective, exposing the ways in which wounded Western, and specifically American, hegemony post-9/11 has produced the total demonization and dehumanisation of entire populations. He produces a record of this suffering that runs counter to those cultural memory frames surrounding the 'war on terror' that are oblivious—preoccupied with the maintenance of American mythologies—to the perspectives and stories of those designated Other.

Missing in Afghanistan

Aslam's representation of Afghanistan in *The Blind Man's Garden* reflects its status in the post-9/11 period as a nation rendered collateral damage by Western powers seeking the

recovery of hegemonic dominance. Where Bond understands American exceptionalism as a myth that flourishes partly due to existential threat, in "Time, Personhood, Politics" Edkins argues similarly that the formation of the social or symbolic order of the sovereign state, or its reformation following crisis, depends upon the determination of a threatening Other (2014, 135). Elucidating this process, Edkins draws on Lacanian thought to first trace the relationship between the sovereign state and personhood in contemporary politics. At the level of the individual, Edkins claims, entering into the "shared symbolic or linguistic world" results in the production of a "gap" (2014, 129). This gap is constituted by the "lack or excess" formed when one assumes an "allocated" place in the symbolic order (Edkins 2014, 129). Edkins explains that a person is "always both more and less than the identity implied by their entry into the symbolic" (2014, 129); as such the person is "missing" – they are "incomplete, lacking […], produced around a lack or an excess" (Edkins 2014, 129). Thus, Edkins identifies an "ontological trauma" at the "root of subjectivity and the social order" which that social order must then work to conceal (2014, 131). Paradoxically, the existence of this ontological trauma is vital to the survival of the symbolic order of the state, as "without the notion of exception, without the prospect of an outside, an enemy, sovereign politics fails" (Edkins 2014, 135).

In this way, Edkins' conceptualisation of "missing" persons can also function to describe the relationship between America's global dominance and the population of Afghanistan following 9/11. Within the dynamics of post-9/11 discourse, people in Afghanistan are rendered entirely "missing"—existing only in their status as a population located outside of the dominant symbolic order and made to represent the frightening, chaotic Other. No longer a nation in its own right, Afghanistan became a space of "missing" people—a canvas made blank for the performance of American recovery.

Aslam opens *The Blind Man's Garden* in Pakistan, at Rohan's home, moving narrative focus gradually toward Afghanistan so as to contrast the two spaces, the latter now under invasion. It is October 2001 and Rohan is contemplating the sequence of events that led to the invasion of Afghanistan by "Western armies" (Aslam 2013a, 6). Aslam emphasises the distance between Heer and New York as Rohan remarks in rather abstract terms upon the "day of fire" that befell American cities (Aslam 2013a, 6). The 9/11 attacks hold little emotional resonance for Rohan; he is instead attuned to their aftermath as one of the people living in a "guilty nation" (Aslam 2013a, 6). At his home in Pakistan, Rohan also stands at a remove from the violence unfolding over the Afghan border, though he is aware of the "buildings, orchards and hills" being "torn apart by bombs and fire-shells" (Aslam 2013a, 6). Though Aslam locates Rohan's home at a safe distance from the current conflict in Afghanistan, he nonetheless establishes it as a space that has historically been impinged upon by war and its attendant trauma: the land has been in Rohan's family for generations and has seen the hardships of Pakistan's own history as a postcolonial nation, dating back to his great-grandfather, who bred horses there during the mutiny against the British in 1857.

In this sense, Aslam repeats an effective feature from *The Wasted Vigil.* In both novels, the house at the centre of the plot—the location that all significant characters regard as a home of sorts—is a site of history and memory. In Aslam's earlier novel, Marcus Caldwell's home had been the site of numerous traumas during Afghanistan's turbulent history. It witnessed abductions by Soviet soldiers; raids by Taliban foot-soldiers; the onset of madness among its inhabitants; and the arrival of ghosts in later years as the growing weight of a troubled history eventually wore down the barrier between the realm of the living and that of the dead. Significantly, however, in Aslam's earlier novel the house at the centre of the plot is also allowed to function as a site of discovery and cross-cultural interaction. This is where characters from disparate parts of the globe meet and interact, learning about

themselves and their national histories as they relate to Afghan history. Though the novel ends in tragedy for almost everyone present, the house nevertheless serves as a centre of inquiry and education. As the site of a former school, a place of Buddhist pilgrimage and home to a vast library, the property is an active presence in the narrative; Marcus' house simultaneously shelters characters from Afghanistan's dangers while confronting them with their role in cultivating the country's "mayhem" (Aslam 2008, 111).

Rohan's home in *The Blind Man's Garden* shares a number of the characteristics of Marcus'. It, too, is a site that retains evidence of national history, as the influence of Islam is enshrined in the property. A former schoolhouse, each classroom is named after one of the cities noted within the narrative as being important to Islam. However, the narrative function of this house differs in significant ways; most importantly, it is noted as a site of departure rather than one of arrival or congregation. Located at the heart of Heer, a fictional Pakistani town of Aslam's creation, the house offers a point of contrast to the chaos of Afghanistan. At the outset of the novel, it is a space occupied by a close-knit extended family, intact other than the loss of Rohan's wife Sofia, with further family members living nearby. The inhabitants have been untouched by recent conflict, separated from Afghanistan by a border and a substantial train journey. It is only as family members depart Heer and venture into the chaos of post-invasion Afghanistan that Rohan's home begins to collect ghosts of trauma to rival those occupying Marcus' house.

Jeo, Rohan's son and a newlywed medical student, is the first family member drawn to Afghanistan to offer medical aid. Mikal, Jeo's foster brother, quickly decides to follow. Aslam creates a sense of foreboding as he sends his protagonists into a war zone. Afghanistan is described as "the territory of clans and tribes", where "along with jewellery and land, children inherit missiles" (Aslam 2013a, 35). Mikal in particular demonstrates an acute awareness of where he is headed and the dangers that might await him there. He gestures

under his arm at one point to indicate to Jeo where he has a "Beretta" hidden under his clothes (Aslam 2013a, 36). In Mikal, an orphan, Aslam offers a character of similar background to Casa in *The Wasted Vigil.* Mikal's situation differs, however, in that the absence of outright war in Pakistan meant that Mikal and his brother Basie could be fostered by Rohan, instead of finding themselves in one of the many Madrassas run out of the refugee camps along the Pakistan-Afghan border. As a result, Mikal merely grew into an adult with an outsized understanding of conflict, death and what it takes to survive. Ultimately, in Mikal's gentle, measured characterisation Aslam foregrounds a non-Western protagonist who has not been enticed by the prospect of violence or the promise of revenge for the tragedies that have befallen him. Far from avoiding the reality of trauma and its role in radicalisation, in Mikal Aslam offers a representation of the vast majority of Pakistani and Afghan citizens who are touched, but not moulded, by the effects of living in a region plagued by conflict.

Mikal's worldliness and instinctual understanding of the danger awaiting him in Afghanistan is seen in his reaction to flowers left in a cabin on their train journey. Though the lilies are plastic, they still inspire reverence in Mikal. Lilies, of course, are commonly associated with death and funeral rites in the Christian tradition: lilies are thought to represent the return of the soul, of innocence, to the departed. The plastic flowers take on a similar meaning here as Mikal holds "the whole cluster of them to his body" as part of an "obligatory tithe" (Aslam 2013a, 36). For Mikal, this gesture represents perhaps a desperate attempt to retain his innocence as he travels toward Afghanistan; we might also read his reverence as born out of his attachment to Rohan's home, where lilies grow in the garden. Mikal opens the carriage window and throws one of the flowers out into the night, watching as it falls on a "rotting thatched roof" (Aslam 2013a, 36). Given his general apprehension about this trip, we might regard this as a sign of resignation to his fate and a farewell to innocence, his own or perhaps even that of his home in Pakistan, as it is soon to be disturbed by his disappearance

into conflict. By narrating the journey and overlaying it with such foreboding imagery, Aslam makes clear that crossing the border into Afghanistan is not to be taken lightly; in October 2001, this was an act of extreme courage, as Mikal and Jeo were entering a space whose very right to exist was under siege by a Western superpower determined to see it only as enemy territory.

Aslam suitably frames their entrance into Afghanistan as a crossing-over. Mikal and Jeo's time on the train functions as a form of *rite de passage*; the journey represents time spent in a liminal state, between the childhood and adolescence spent in Heer and the fate that awaits them in Afghanistan. Mikal and Jeo do not merely enter a neighbouring country; they pass through a portal into a land that no longer resembles a functioning state. We are told that "the door has opened and both of them have entered the future" (Aslam 2013a, 48). Aslam's reference to "the future" here can be read in different ways. Most obviously it refers to the ways in which Mikal and Jeo's lives will be shaped by their time in Afghanistan; in this sense, the comment serves to foreshadow the tragedies that will befall their trip. A broader reading, however, considers Aslam's use of the definite article here. By framing Afghanistan as "the future" Aslam appears to suggest that the reduction of the country to a barren, dangerous landscape at the hands of Western hegemonic powers might eventually be regarded as a prototypical occurrence. Since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, we have seen a number of states—Syria being the stand-out example—fall victim to this paradigm. With governments in disarray—or taken over by dictatorial regimes—and populations either trapped or fleeing as refugees, the survival or total destruction of these states often falls within the purview of Western powers.

Mikal and Jeo are greeted by a foreboding darkness as they venture over the border into Afghanistan in the back of a truck and immediately encounter Taliban forces. Aslam establishes early in the narrative a fictionalised Afghanistan defined by its treatment in the

immediate aftermath of 9/11. The narrative does not explore the ways in which the Afghan people have persevered; nor does it attempt to cast the Afghan people as a population undeserving of the wrath of a global superpower, however accurate such a portrayal might have been. Instead, Aslam focuses on the reality of the invasion and the chaos it engendered. Finding the Taliban alive and well in the mountainous regions beyond the cities is indicative of an Afghanistan that has not found liberation but only further terror in the wake of the invasion. As Cockburn notes, the Taliban suffered no definitive defeat in October 2001 or since. As American troops provided aerial assistance for the Northern Alliance, the primary source of opposition for the regime in Afghanistan, the Taliban were merely forced to recognise the weakening of their position and acknowledge the need to relinquish power and retreat. According to Cockburn, the Taliban fighters simply "went home" (2016, 17). Abandoned by the Pakistani and Saudi Arabian governments after 9/11, they had no choice but to recognise their position as untenable (Cockburn 2016, 24). The need for their retreat was compounded by a public that were now able to "scent blood" and who longed for the total destruction of the oppressive regime—a destruction that, despite public appetite, never came to pass (Cockburn 2016, 24).

When Mikal and Jeo encounter the Taliban in the desert, we recognise not a defeated group, but one fleeing from imminent destruction so that they can eventually return. Aslam thus depicts Afghanistan in October 2001 as a liminal space. Far from the liberated land of Western news coverage, it is a country suspended in the purgatory that emerges when a regime collapses and a society is left at the precipice of an uncertain future imposed by foreign powers. The uncertainty is, of course, born out of the fact that Afghan liberation was not at the forefront of concerns when the US and its NATO allies made the decision to invade. As Dunia in *The Wasted Vigil* remarks, "the Taliban regime had been in place for years and no one was particularly bothered about getting rid of it" (Aslam 2008, 374). She

insists that America invaded not out of any altruistic desire to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban, but out of a desire for "retribution for what happened […] in 2001" (Aslam 2008, 374).

This careless approach to invasion and regime change is characteristic of the American, and more broadly Western, response to the trauma felt in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and is captured in Aslam's description of a desolate Afghanistan. According to Alla Ivanchikova in "Imagining Afghanistan in Deep Time: Nadeem Aslam and the Aesthetics of the Geologic Turn", "novels set in Afghanistan commonly feature the country as a depleted terrain that serves as a stage for the loss of humanity, a landscape so dark that Joseph Conrad would have been envious" (2017b, 293). Aslam's novel is no exception, as Mikal and Jeo are surrounded by a barren landscape that only shows signs of life as a warzone. The distant sounds of battle can be heard as they meet their captors; one of the men responds to their surprise and tells them that "the world sounds like this all the time, we just don't hear it" but "sometimes in some places we do" (Aslam 2013a, 50). As such Afghanistan is designated, both by the international community and Aslam's text, as a place in which conflict is not an abstract concept but an everyday reality that overwhelms all other aspects of life.

As Mikal and Jeo roll into the village with the Taliban transport, this reality is further inscribed as the people they see "withdrawing to either side" of the road, "hugging the wall with eyes lowered", are not described in any detail (Aslam 2013a, 56). The lack of individuation given to Afghan characters in this section of the novel reflects a further aspect of Edkins' theory regarding "missing" persons. Edkins acknowledges Giorgio Agamben's analysis of biopolitics – in which the "missing" person is regarded as "bare life" or "homo sacer"—and draws on this to explain that where the maintenance of life has become the defining preoccupation of politics, populations rather than individuals become the primary "site of political investment and authority" (Edkins 2014, 130). The population, Edkins notes, is "produced as a site of regulation, control and intervention"— the person as a discrete entity

worthy of “political investment” is therefore “missing” (2014, 130). Thus, Afghanistan can be regarded as “missing” in two distinct senses. Firstly, it is designated as the ontological “gap” necessary for the shoring up of the symbolic order of the Western state (Edkins 2014, 129); by exerting control over Afghanistan in the aftermath of the attacks, Western governments attempted to demonstrate dominance over the ontological trauma existing just beyond the conscious boundaries of the symbolic order. Secondly, as part of this process, Afghan people were regarded only as a collective and denied individuation or consideration of their grievability. As such, in *The Blind Man’s Garden* there are ghostly approximations of a population living in a nation under siege from all sides. Instead of detailed descriptions of crowds or individuals, Aslam provides descriptions of places where blood remains “in bursts on the walls” where people had been executed by the regime (Aslam 2013a, 56).

The anonymity of the Afghan people seems deliberate; though their lack of individuation might seem counterintuitive to Aslam’s project of giving voice, it ultimately succeeds in demonstrating their marginalisation. Aslam confronts his readers with the fact of Afghan people’s exile to the realm of the “missing” following 9/11 by allowing their silence to take up space within the narrative. Edkins explains, through the concept of “neighbourliness”, the value of foregrounding “missing persons” in political discourse, as Aslam is doing here (2014, 138). The “sovereign symbolic order exists”, Edkins claims, so that “persons do not have to acknowledge” the “traumatic gap around which they are constituted”—so that they can “take refuge in personality or social role” (2014, 137). “Neighbourliness”, by contrast, is defined as “an acknowledgement of the impossibility of completeness and a recognition of the trauma around which each person constitutes a fantasy of subjectivity” (Edkins 2014, 137). By bearing witness to the person “*as missing*”—individuals and populations entirely removed from the protections of the symbolic order and treated as Other— we can come to recognise the harmful machinations underpinning the

"social reality" and identify, through our own feelings of alienation, with their exclusion (Edkins 2014, 138, emphasis in original). As such, Aslam's depiction of the Afghan population of this small village as silent and stripped of agency—the hitherto ignored collateral damage of the invasion—forces the reading audience to engage with the reality of American-led Western hegemonic power as a totalising force that demands conformity and, when faced with non-compliance, punishes with ostracism.

Even when describing the citizens of the village as militant in their hatred for the Taliban, Aslam allows them little agency. The fort occupied by the regime is established as the most "hated and feared place in the region", explaining why the locals will "show no mercy" when they rise up against the Taliban regime with "American reinforcement and weaponry" during an "organised" siege (Aslam 2013a, 58). After years of brutality and trauma at the hands of the Taliban, the occupants of the village are understandably single-minded when presented with the opportunity to avenge their suffering. Nonetheless, Aslam describes them in rather fearsome terms—as a mob acting now with the permission and support of the American forces in the region, rather than as part of a self-determined uprising. Aslam describes "more than a thousand attackers" coming en masse through "the smoke and dust", "kissing their guns before pulling the triggers" (Aslam 2013a, 65). They share a determination to inflict maximum brutality and a sense of "disappointment" upon finding far fewer Taliban in the fort than was hoped, "pouring the rage and violence and metal meant for several men into just one" (Aslam 2013a, 65). The only fighter described as an individual is a woman seeking vengeance for the death of her husband. In her anger and her American-sanctioned violence, she is described in less than human terms, "a look of wildness on her face" and her "eyes crazed with a radiant power" (Aslam 2013a, 66). As such, like her fellow insurgents, the woman is "missing" and remains so; once a victim under a brutal regime, she

is now a pawn empowered to seek vengeance as part of a power grab designed not to grant her autonomy, but to serve the interests of Western powers who desire the fall of the Taliban.

Mikal and Jeo, as "paid for" recruits to the Taliban, are caught in the middle of the clash (Aslam 2013a, 53). Their status as Pakistani citizens does not exempt them from the conditions of life in Afghanistan in October 2001. They are helplessly caught in the crossfire of a battle that does not employ nuance or attempt to differentiate between enemies. There is no recourse for the brothers to escape, even as victims of the regime themselves; much like their Afghan counterparts, they are imperilled by proximity to terrorists and extremists. Jeo is murdered in the raid and while Mikal is wounded, this does not substantially reduce his value as a relatively healthy young man capable of hard labour. As a result, Mikal is passed around various warlords in the region until he is finally sold out to the Americans as a terrorist for an informant's fee of five thousand dollars.

The Brick Factory: Torture and Imperial Violence in Afghanistan

Moving from a generalised depiction of Afghanistan under siege to a direct confrontation with those in charge of meting out hardship, Aslam describes Mikal's time at a prison camp run by US military forces. Aslam uses Mikal's perspective as a lens through which to describe the conditions at this prison, thereby giving us access to a perspective not typically available or actively silenced by those who wish to ensure the continued use of such sites. Aslam deliberately makes Mikal's capture a terrible shock to the reading audience; despite Mikal's shrewdness he only realises his predicament at the very last moment before the American troops arrive at the mosque to collect their prisoners, noticing a boot print in the snow and understanding suddenly that the "warlord sent him here to be picked up by the Americans" (Aslam 2013a, 154). As such, we share in Mikal's feelings of helplessness and confusion; we are in no doubt as to his innocence and the injustice of his arrest. In this way, Aslam circumvents the justifying rhetoric that typically accompanies such arrests as part of

the ‘war on terror’. We are placed on the side of the unfortunate civilian and allowed to bear witness to the performance of American exceptionalism, coming to understand the arbitrary cruelty that facilitates the maintenance of such a myth.

According to Anne McClintock in “Paranoid Empire: Spectres from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib”, sites like Abu Ghraib and Bagram, which Aslam is no doubt attempting to represent here, specialised in the production of the enemy (2009). The practice of invading nations deemed vaguely complicit in terrorist activity could not sustain popular support for war over a long period of time; these sites provided a dedicated space where the elusive terrorist figure could be given corporeal form. During the invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent war in Iraq, Mikal’s plight became a common occurrence as people were “picked up in random sweeps or handed over for considerable bounty” (McClintock 2009, 51). As in Mikal’s case, grounds for arrest were most often spurious or entirely absent. McClintock notes that among the captives present at Guantanamo as well as numerous other sites in the occupied regions were “taxi drivers, shepherds, shopkeepers, labourers, prostitutes, relatives of possible ‘suspects’ and an array of people with no credible connection to terrorist organisations” (2009, 51).

Questioning the logic of torturing people “whom the government and the interrogators” knew to be almost certainly innocent, McClintock’s analysis recognises an intensification of violence and an increasingly authoritarian approach to the maintenance of American dominance in the post-9/11 period (2009, 51). Referring to America’s far-reaching influence, McClintock describes an empire that “extends its ghostly filaments” through the “shadowy, global gulag of secret interrogation prisons, ‘black sites,’ torture ships and off-shore internment camps” (2009, 51). Though certainly not unique to the post-9/11 era, this violence is the marker of an empire that “has come to be dominated by two grand and dangerous hallucinations” (McClintock 2009, 51). For McClintock, the disturbance of the

attacks meant that the US became enamoured with "fantasies of global omnipotence" while simultaneously finding itself plagued by a relentless paranoia regarding external forces it could neither predict nor control but that were nevertheless vital for the survival of the national myth of exceptionality (2009, 51). McClintock argues that the imperial state is suspended between "delusions of inherent superiority and omnipotence" and "phantasms of threat and engulfment" (2009, 53). When the pendulum swings too far toward the latter, as after 9/11, "pyrotechnic displays of violence" are wont to occur (McClintock 2009, 53).

These "pyrotechnic displays of violence" can be recognised most easily in footage of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, but they also occur in the hidden spaces—those prisons and interrogation camps shrouded in secrecy and made to appear as reasonable solutions to the problem of the menacing Other. It is in these places that the 'war on terror', in all its frightening intangibility, can be made real. McClintock describes the prisons as a solution to a dilemma facing the US in the early days of the war: "how to *embody* the invisible enemy and *be visibly seen* to punish it?" (2009, 57, emphasis in original). They "*had to turn ordinary people into enemy bodies,* bodies that could be subordinated" and "put on display for retaliation" (McClintock 2009, 57, emphasis in original). McClintock describes a process of "disinterested rationality", a "performance of bureaucratic rationalisation" wherein the "prisoners are made legible as enemies" so that the "occupation" could be rendered legitimate (2009, 59). We can recognise this as the inevitable conclusion of the process Bond describes of a superpower acting out its exceptionality following a threat; the violence is pre-emptively justified as righteous, a part of the national dedication to finding and defeating evil. It is impossible, then, that anyone might be unjustly targeted as the enemy; to warrant the attention of the benevolent, well-intentioned and reluctantly violent US military apparatus is to have one's guilt pre-determined, a foregone conclusion.

Aslam prioritises Mikal's perspective throughout this section of the narrative, destabilising the constructions described by McClintock and Bond so that the bloody process of myth-making is laid bare. Through Mikal's frightened gaze we discern the desperation motivating the behaviour of the US military officers. At their most violent, they appear not as the powerful guardians of world order, but as petty despots preoccupied only with maintaining their own dominance. The degree of their desperation is evident in their treatment of Mikal; he cannot be treated with mercy and dignity simply because his humanity is anathema to the existence and purpose of the prison. If his guilt is to be rendered legible then all traces of his personhood, his innocence, must be erased so that he can better carry the designation of enemy combatant.

Aslam insists that we bear witness to the callously efficient process through which this transformation of identity is executed. As Mikal arrives at the prison he is assigned the number "120", stripping him immediately of his individuality (Aslam 2013a, 32). In a fast-moving and sparsely detailed section of the novel, Aslam describes Mikal's confusion and horror as he is forcibly inducted into the prison. With either no communication or only cursory requests for permission, prison medics begin to treat Mikal for the wounds sustained during his time in Afghanistan; they "clean the wounds and dress them" using bandages that are "such a brilliant clean white" that it is "painful on his eye" (Aslam 2013a, 175). Mikal is handled with a detached, clinical approach that belies any pretence to compassion. The extent to which Mikal's subjectivity has been discarded here is made clear as his captors move away from medical treatment toward an invasive search procedure that reminds Mikal, and the reader, of his status as a suspected terrorist. Mikal is violated as his captors cut away his clothes and perform a cavity search; unable to protest in their language, Mikal is reduced to an animalistic figure as he "snarls" and thrashes around, requiring his captors to pin him down (Aslam 2013a, 176). The guards complete Mikal's debasement as they put him in a

jumpsuit, close manacles around his wrists and ankles, and photograph him against a height chart.

Significantly, Mikal's hair and beard are shaved off in what can be read as an act of cultural aggression given the context of his imprisonment—an aspect of Mikal's torture that is consistent throughout as we later hear that officers had threatened "to desecrate the Koran in front of him" (Aslam 2013a, 215). This treatment seems to be designed to exhaust Mikal into compliance. Humiliated, searched and treated like property, he no longer has the will to protest or even to express horror at his predicament. Instead, as soon as his captors leave the room, Mikal falls into a "dead-weighted sleep", his body performing the basic functions of life though his autonomy has been entirely overridden (Aslam 2013a, 176). In this way, Mikal's time at the prison sees him experience a similar fate to those Afghan civilians present at the raid on the Taliban; Mikal's personhood is revoked as he becomes a pawn in a global conflict that does not recognise his subjectivity. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* Giorgio Agamben draws on Foucauldian biopolitics to provide a framework within which to consider such loss of subjectivity under sovereign power.[1] Agamben explains that a "state of exception" is formed under biopolitics where "bare life" is separated from and prioritised over personhood (1998, 7). Derek Gregory explains this as occurring "where the law is suspended" over a "zone of abandonment" – a space beyond the margins—called the *space of exception* (2004, 62, emphasis in original).[2] "Homo sacer" emerges here—a body in possession of "sacred life" who "may be killed but not sacrificed" (Agamben 1998, 83).

[1] It is important to note that Agamben challenges Foucault's assertion that, as Edkins puts it, "in modern times sovereign power has given way, as the organising relation […] to biopolitics" (2014, 130). Agamben instead suggests "that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power" (1998, 6). He comments that "*it can be said that the production of biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power"* (Agamben 1998, 6, emphasis in original).

[2] The "state of exception" is explained by Agamben as a "suspen[sion]" by the sovereign power of the juridical "order's own validity" (1998, 15). According to Agamben, the "state of exception actually constituted, in its very separatedness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested" (1998, 9).

Homines sacris are the “mute bearers of what Agamben calls ‘bare life,’ deprived of language and the political life that language makes possible” (Gregory 2004, 63).

Gregory extrapolates Agamben’s argument here to argue that “Taliban fighters and al-Qaeda terrorists, Afghan refugees and civilians, were all regarded as *homines sacri”* during the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan (2004, 63, emphasis in original). Žižek describes the ways in which Afghans were reduced to “the political Enemy excluded from the political arena” (cited in Gregory 2004, 65); here, Afghans could be deemed “beyond the scope of international law”, beyond the protections of the Geneva Conventions (Gregory 2004, 65). The fact that Mikal is Pakistani, not Afghan, only serves to emphasise the extent to which his personhood is rendered an abstraction; Mikal is reduced here to a Muslim body that is present, and thus suspicious, in an enemy territory. During interrogation Mikal is quizzed as to whether he is “a Pakistani, an Afghan, or an Afghan born and raised in Pakistan” (Aslam 2013a, 177); when Mikal does not answer, his interrogator moves swiftly on and asks him to identify photographs of men “in Arab headdress” and “Palestinian scarves”, revealing that such distinctions are irrelevant in this setting (Aslam 2013a, 177). For Gregory, this approach to foreign policy culminates in imprecise bombing campaigns, carelessness toward refugees and civilian populations, and—most importantly for our purposes—the opening of prison camps such as that where Mikal is detained (2004, 65).

Mikal’s status as an individual is obscured as he passes into the realm of bare life; his beliefs, his family, and his hopes for the future are rendered irrelevant. He is, to borrow a phrase from Edkins, a “life taken out of use”, simply a body to be kept alive – or not, depending on how his existence will best serve the needs of US foreign policy (Edkins 2014, 130). Of course, though Mikal is stripped of his personhood as he enters the American prison in Afghanistan, this is not to say that he becomes a politically-irrelevant figure. As bare life, Mikal, like Afghanistan itself, becomes a blank slate onto which the ills of an entire enemy

culture can be mapped. As Aslam demonstrates here, the process of making bare life does not involve, at least initially, a great deal of violence or torture. Rather, Aslam depicts the making of bare life as a process of matter-of-fact, systematic colonisation of individuals. Aslam demonstrates the frightening ease of this process when implemented as part of the 'war on terror'. With no legal recourse or even the pretence of it, Mikal is broken down into his basic components, retaining only those characteristics necessary for the most fundamental recognition of human life. As such, we bear witness to the reality of these prisons and black sites that have become so ubiquitous since 9/11; these spaces, presented by successive US governments as sites within which the necessary and dispassionate corralling of dangerous figures can be carried out, are revealed as places where the cynical and sinister work of Islamophobic rhetoric finds realisation.

Beyond simply presenting Mikal's point of view for the reader, Aslam also takes care to address the question of how the officers at these camps understand their role. Presumably they do not recognise themselves as agents of a sinister, imperial programme of global control and revenge. Instead, they are convinced of their role as righteous and motivated by only the purest ideals. The notion that Afghanistan's guilt is certain and communal permits treatment of prisoners that would be unthinkable in a different context. As such, visual reminders of this guilt and the condemnation it warrants are kept close-by at the prison. Aslam describes an interrogation room with a "poster of the Twin Towers" pinned on one wall (Aslam 2013a, 176); tellingly, the image on the poster captures "the moment the second plane hit, the fireball attached to the side of the building" (Aslam 2013a, 176). Children's drawings adorn other walls in the prison, depicting "guns shooting at men with beards and helicopters dropping bombs on small figures with turbans" (Aslam 2013a, 184). The presence of these images offers a sense of justification, of legitimacy and provocation, to what happens on site. These posters mark the space as not belonging to Afghanistan, but belonging to the

wounded American state seeking answers for its own suffering. As such, the pain inflicted here is rendered sacrosanct, above reproach in its righteous determination.

By giving us access to the process of interrogation itself, Aslam flips the narrative typically presented in Western media and memory frames: he forces readers to see beneath the veneer of reasonable inquiry to witness the depth of suffering endured at these confrontations. As Mikal's interrogation gets underway, we are re-introduced to a character featured as a protagonist in *The Wasted Vigil,* set a number of years later in Afghanistan. In this earlier novel, we witness David Town come to terms with his past in Afghanistan and his role in perpetuating conflict in the region. With the younger version of David presented in *The Blind Man's Garden*, though, we are given little insight into his feelings about his role in this prison or the treatment of the prisoners. For readers of both novels, David's presence is rather jarring due to the shift in how we are asked to perceive his character. As a generally well-meaning if misguided character in *The Wasted Vigil,* David forms part of the emotional centre of the narrative. We follow him as he comes to terms with a destructive past as an agent of American foreign policy and attempts to make amends for the damage he has caused. In *The Blind Man's Garden,* we encounter David at a distance, seeing him only through Mikal's frightened eyes.

Significantly, Aslam presents David as the strange and frightening Other in this encounter. Mikal focuses on David's whiteness, the narrator commenting that he had "never seen a real white person at close proximity before today" and that he found the "paleness" quite "astonishing" (Aslam 2013a, 176). David makes no effort to bridge the gap between them, emphasising with every question the power differential at play and the assumptions he has made about Mikal's cultural relationship to Islamic extremism. He demands to know if Mikal has an affiliation to the Taliban and if he had "spent time in Sudan, whether he had fought in Kashmir, if he had any links with the man who planned to blow up Los Angeles

airport in 1999, if he had been to Bosnia" (Aslam 2013a, 179). David employs a range of physical 'enhanced interrogation' techniques that are matched in their capacity for harm only by the simultaneous psychological torture inflicted. When not under interrogation, Mikal is confined to a metal cage—an arrangement that McClintock notes as typical for such prisons (Aslam 2013a, 67). While Mikal rests, the officials take advantage of the fact that he talks in his sleep, gleaning information about his home life that Mikal would never volunteer while conscious, such as the names of loved ones, that his captors use to torment him further. Through prolonged exposure to torture and manipulation, as Mikal comes to suspect his captors of possessing the ability to read minds, we discern their behaviour as cruel and recognise the rather pathetic machinations underpinning their authority.

In this section of the novel Aslam poses a very particular challenge to the government-sanctioned media frames employed to rationalise torture in these prison sites. As McClintock notes, the release of a series of shocking photographs from Abu Ghraib in February 2004 was met with a lacklustre official response (2009, 59). According to McClintock, "over sixteen thousand photographs were taken, of which fewer than two hundred were leaked to the public" (2009, 59). These photographs were a fundamental part of the culture of brutality such spaces normalised. For McClintock, they exemplified an attitude of "disinterested rationality" wherein practitioners would record "their own violence as no more than the bureaucratised, rational calculus of cause and effect" (2009, 59). The documentation of such behaviour allowed it to take on the markers of officialdom; the humiliation and routine degradation of the Other was folded into a narrative of legitimate inquiry. As McClintock notes, the release of the photographs did not inspire the kind of backlash one might expect given their nature. Instead, the pre-existing narrative of exceptionalism was invoked to assure the public that Lynndie England and her co-conspirators were rogue officers whose behaviour was not representative (McClintock 2009,

64). The discourse surrounding the photographs was shifted by officials so that it became primarily concerned with whether or not pornography had perverted otherwise good soldiers to the point where they were now capable of such depravity. Of course, as Jean Baudrillard notes in “Pornography of War”, the images were representative of a “power now aimless and purposeless since it has no plausible enemy and acts with total impunity” (Baudrillard 2010, 199). Nevertheless, the conversation, as McClintock points out, became less concerned with probing and condemning a system that allowed such brutality than contemplating whether these photographs signified the loss of moral high ground for US forces in the region (2009, 63).

Given this context, Aslam’s decision to foreground David Town in this section of the novel becomes clear. As a featured character in an earlier novel, David can be assumed to have a degree of pre-established familiarity to the audience; for a sizable proportion of those reading, he is not a new character but someone whose motivations and values are already understood. Aslam’s use of intertextuality here allows for us to interpret David’s use of torture and manipulation not as the methods of an unhinged, rogue official, but as the routine practice of a measured individual behaving within the parameters of accepted standards. In this way, Aslam de-mystifies the use of torture at these facilities and reveals the content of the Abu Ghraib photographs as typical rather than exceptional.

Further, Aslam shifts the conversation within his narrative away from the rhetoric surrounding the practice of torture and toward an examination of the impact such practices can have upon victims. Through Mikal, we gain access to a perspective entirely silenced or ignored by the discourse on sites like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo; rather than engaging with the officers to debate the moral integrity of their behaviour, we are given access to an underrepresented perspective as Mikal struggles to reconcile with his surroundings. Despite official claims that such prisons take on the unfortunate but necessary task of imprisoning

dangerous individuals and stemming the tide of global terrorism, Aslam demonstrates that these sites can, and most often do, have the opposite effect. The prison is located in an abandoned brick factory, symbolically significant when we consider its role in erecting new barriers between cultures. During his stay here, Mikal does not become more sympathetic to the notion of a righteous West and a threatening Islam; instead, his confusion and terror eventually come to shape him to fit more closely the dangerous stereotype foisted upon him by his captors. As the guards insist upon the relentless reinforcement of generalisations that refuse to allow for his humanity, Mikal comes to understand himself as Other; he begins to identify more strongly with his Pakistani heritage as a response to his denigration and begins to suspect that the gulf between the two cultures driving the violence at the prison may well be intractable.

During one particularly harsh episode of torture, Mikal is thrown into a "chamber whose walls, floor and ceiling are painted entirely black and his arms are shacked to a ring overhead" (Aslam 2013a, 187). The darkness is so total that the narrator likens it to "the shadow darkness of the grave after death" (Aslam 2013a, 187). In many ways, Mikal experiences this space as a sort of death; he is left in the chamber for an indeterminate amount of time and finds himself contemplating the "measureless void" that now dominates his existence (Aslam 2013a, 187). In a very real sense, Mikal is removed from the realm of human experience, the realm of the living, and forced to regard his jailors as the "keepers appointed over Hell" (Aslam 2013a, 187). In this instance, Mikal is no longer merely suspended in the purgatorial space of the prison, but cast into a space that resembles, to him, a Hell-scape. This confrontation with death, with a simulation of his own obsolescence, is not something Mikal is able to reconcile and so we see him slip into a hallucinatory state where the trauma of cultural degradation manifests as a man who enters his chamber and with a "soulless glance" begins to laugh derisively at Mikal (Aslam 2013a, 187).

Initially, Mikal understands the derision to be directed at him specifically, at his "having made the mess on the floor, for being worthless", and his failure to "help Jeo" (Aslam 2013a, 188). However, Mikal becomes increasingly distressed as, in line with the cultural violence he has experienced, his psyche reframes his feelings of personal humiliation to encompass the spheres of the political and the national within which his identity is forged. In one continuous sentence, Aslam gives us access to Mikal's harried thoughts as he runs through the ways in which he has experienced the shame of belonging to a "guilty nation" while at the prison. Though his captors' general degradation of Mikal's heritage is non-specific since they remain unsure as to his precise nationality, Mikal attaches to the laughter "contempt for him and his nation where the taps don't have water" and "where everyone it seems is engaged in killing everyone else" (Aslam 2013a, 188). Forced over the last days and weeks to see this region through the eyes of a Western world that regards it with disdain, Mikal contemplates its reputation on the world stage not as a space impacted by the long-lasting effects of colonialism, but as one populated by pre-modern people capable only of brutality—a "land of revenge attacks" (Aslam 2013a, 188). Succumbing to frustration and humiliation, we witness anger rise in Mikal as he understandably comes to concur with much of this assessment, regarding Pakistan as a place that people cannot wait to leave—a "caliphate of rubble" (Aslam 2013a, 189).

However, Mikal's anger at Pakistan for its various failings is not focused entirely inward; despite his exasperation, Mikal recognises that his captors, and the Western powers they represent, bear considerable responsibility for the state of contemporary Pakistan. A stubborn nationalism is roused in Mikal as he is forced to relive "every shame, indignity, humiliation, dishonour, defeat and disgrace he has ever experienced in his twenty years" (Aslam 2013a, 189). Mikal begins to whisper accusations back at his imagined tormentor; he wishes he had the ability to ask in English: "if I agree with you that what you say is true,

would you agree that your country played a part in ruining mine, however small?" (Aslam 2013a, 188). The concession seems to be largely born out of a sense of defeat; Mikal has been so thoroughly demoralised by his time at the prison that he is too meek, even here, to mount a more scathing critique. His trauma is solidified as the illusion dissipates, leaving him confused, despite the absurdity of the alternative, as to whether this was in fact a hallucination.

Mikal, forced through this process to confront both his mortality and the debasement of his nationality by foreign powers, is unable to reconcile his experience with the benign façade of American dominance. In his trauma, he adopts the demeanour of the combative, animalistic Other, appearing to fulfil the expectations of those holding him captive as a terrorist. In one instance, Mikal "lunges across the table with his teeth bared" at David's mention of Naheed, Jeo's widow, finally giving over to the "animal part" of his brain (Aslam 2013a, 190). Mikal's formerly gentle nature has been supplanted by the lessons of trauma; he is unable to shake the knowledge that his captors maintain total control over his life and death and the likelihood that, despite his innocence, they will discard his life as worthless. As he is granted his freedom, having maintained his innocence throughout brutal interrogations, Mikal is unable to trust the two officers tasked with returning him to the site of his abduction; he "wonders if his murder will take place inside the ruined mosque, enclosed by the words of the Koran inscribed on the walls" (Aslam 2013a, 215). Mikal has been treated as an enemy combatant, an entity whose very existence is threatening and offensive to those he has come to understand as violent and incapable of mercy. Thus, his captors display a rather stunning degree of arrogance—belying an assumption of global fealty to the myth of American exceptionalism—in assuming that they will be trusted implicitly by this man they have tortured.

As Mikal is released, Aslam emphasises the span of his captivity for the reader. Contextualising Mikal's inability to believe that his captors have come to find his innocence credible or his life worth sparing, Aslam describes months of beatings, humiliations and psychological torture experienced from January to April of 2002. Given the circumstances, Mikal's distrust seems reasonable and we understand why David extending a hand and wishing Mikal "luck" might come across as threatening rather than conciliatory (Aslam 2013a, 214). Mikal's snap decision to shoot the two military policemen is framed as a realistic attempt at self-preservation within this context. In Aslam's deliberately ambiguous rendering of the incident, we are told that Mikal smells "the whiff of sulphur that is the unmistakeable clue that a bullet has been fired"—a certainty that Mikal later doubts but which does not seem beyond the realm of possibility for either the reader or Mikal given the cruelty attributed to these individuals previously in the narrative (Aslam 2013a, 215). As Mikal reaches toward the officer's holster, grabs his gun and begins firing, Aslam situates the reader so that we identify with Mikal's desperation and empathise with his impulse toward self-protection; as Mikal's traumatised mind takes over, Aslam describes his protagonist's "astonishment" at his own actions, demonstrating the extent to which Mikal's behaviour is not a conscious turn toward violence or vengeance, but an involuntary response born out of exposure to the most harrowing conditions (Aslam 2013a, 215).

Importantly, Aslam does not frame Mikal's violence in this moment as indicative of radicalisation on his part. Aslam's purpose here is not to illustrate the ways in which prolonged exposure to the denigration of one's culture and self can result in a turn toward extremism or a breakdown in one's morality. This is a common refrain employed to explain the radicalisation of those subjected to torture at facilities like the brick factory. Though loyalties to extremist causes might well emerge from prolonged exposure to violence and dehumanisation—a pattern that is explored in other sections of the narrative, as we will see—

Aslam rejects the notion that this is a default response by not reducing Mikal's suffering to a catalyst. Aslam instead opts to eschew the suggestion that Mikal has simply not been recruited yet and depicts his outburst as born from desperate fear, rather than newly found religious fervour or even hatred for the West.

However, as this breakdown results in the deaths of two military police officers, the reasons or motivations behind Mikal's actions are irrelevant. By killing the Americans Mikal merely confirms the suspicions of those who deemed him on sight an untrustworthy, irredeemable Other; his behaviour will not be subject to careful review or become the impetus for soul-searching among the Americans involved in torture. The fantasy of exceptionalism insulates them from such questions and allows them to merely condemn Mikal to death as vengeance while taking an ahistorical approach to their own role in his apparent radicalisation. Mikal's personhood is now permanently suspended; having participated in the murder of those whose grievability is self-evident, whatever his reasons, his fate is now sealed. In this way, Aslam demonstrates how the myth of American exceptionalism, and Western hegemonic power in general, permits atrocity and allows for the total abdication of responsibility. From this point in the narrative, Aslam frames Mikal's very survival as an act of major political resistance; he runs into the mountains of Afghanistan to escape. Leaving his identity behind and assuming his own death as inevitable, Mikal is forced now to consciously become a ghostly figure as he reclaims a measure of agency that is limited by his status as a fugitive.

Ghost-making and Haunted Communities: Mourning and Melancholia in Heer

Alongside the narrative of internment and torture, Aslam also grants narrative voice to the perspective of the bereaved Other, whose existence is frequently ignored by Western media frames. Aslam intercuts the narrative unfolding of Mikal's ordeal with sections of the novel set in Heer, at times denying us certainty as to his fate. Early sections depicting Mikal's

grief-stricken family are set following the ambush at the Taliban fort, but before we encounter Mikal alive, albeit imprisoned, at the warlord's compound. In structuring the narrative so that some aspects of the plot are left unclear as they unfold, Aslam forces the reader to identify with Mikal's loved ones, suspended in a state of confusion. Importantly, Aslam does not instil Jeo's death with the same fraught sense of unsettlement engendered by Mikal's disappearance. Jeo's body arrives back in Heer, lending certainty to his fate while Mikal remains missing, forcing his family to grapple unsuccessfully with the implications of his absence.

In this way, Aslam removes the suffering of those bereaved in conflict zones from the realm of the abstract and traces the impact of what I call "ghost-making" by Western governments as we are introduced to those inevitably haunted by the trauma of irreconcilable loss. "Ghost-making", a term that expands on McClintock's discussion of those "fleshly bodies" made "spectres" by imperial violence (2009, 52) and "conjured into legal ghosts" (2009, 67), describes the specific process by which individuals such as Mikal are removed from their communities, stripped of their personhood and forced to act as pawns in global power struggles, leaving loved ones haunted by the possibility of their return. In developing the concept of ghost-making, I focus particularly on the impact of haunting upon communities—those for whom spectres loom in the place of loved ones—rather than on the experience of the ghostly figure itself, thus highlighting the devastation blithely created by imperial powers who fail to acknowledge the destabilisation engendered by absence and unreconciled grief. In situating the section of the novel in which this process is seen in Pakistan, Aslam depicts the ways in which suffering extends throughout the region and is not exclusive to central war zones alone.

By lending narrative attention to the ways in which communities are devastated by unending turmoil, Aslam addresses a fundamental shortcoming that Stef Craps has identified

as endemic in Western trauma writing, both in the realms of fiction and theory. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds,* Craps criticises what he calls a "lack of interest in the non-Western world" in the existing field of literary trauma studies (2012, 12). Explaining the focus on Western trauma, Craps traces the origins of the field in Holocaust "testimony, literature and history" (2012, 9). Drawing on key theorists and texts in the field, Craps argues that trauma studies is preoccupied with singular instances of Western trauma—such as the Holocaust or 9/11—to the extent that the role of Western nations in cultivating trauma elsewhere is ignored (2012, 11). Craps invokes Laura Brown to explain this blind-spot in trauma theory as symptomatic of a general tendency in the West to not take seriously those traumas suffered by those not conforming to the standard "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (2012, 20); where there is a "differential distribution of precarity across populations", those who do not resemble the dominant group in custom or heritage are, in Judith Butler's phrasing, "made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death", all while simultaneously experiencing the systematic obfuscation of the trauma that accompanies such an imbalance (cited in Craps 2012, 13).

Of course, as Craps points out, redressing this gap in Western trauma writing is not as straightforward as simply adopting non-Western stories into the frameworks used to write about Western trauma. As Craps writes in "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory in the global age", Western notions of trauma—clinical and cultural—are typically orientated around conceptualisations of trauma as an individual phenomenon (2014, 49). According to dominant notions of trauma in Western theory, articulated most influentially in their cultural and literary form by Cathy Caruth, the individual experiences an instance of psychic disruption—often a confrontation with mortality—that cannot be "assimilated as it occurs" and is thus doomed to recur in the form of intrusive flashbacks and nightmares where the

trauma is literally repeated (Caruth 1995, 4). As noted above, Craps critiques Western trauma theory as defined by this event-based model wherein singular instances of traumatic rupture are the focus, eliding more systemic forms of abuse or oppression (2014, 50). Craps argues that in such a narrow focus "the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse" such as "racism, economic domination or political oppression" go unchallenged (2014, 50). According to Craps, Western trauma writing, with its focus on fragmented, anti-narrative forms that are thought to mimic the intrusive repetition of unrepresentable trauma on an individual psyche, favours Eurocentric "experimental, modernist textual strategies" (2014, 50). Crucially, this excludes representation of trauma that does not fit dominant models—is insidious or systemic—leading Craps to advocate for a movement away from reliance on such forms toward an acceptance of the multitude of narrative approaches available for the textual representation of trauma (Craps 2014, 51).[3]

In *The Wasted Vigil,* Aslam's engagement with trauma of the kind that Craps might describe as "unrelenting" and "generalised" addresses the ways in which trauma born of colonial oppression is inadequately addressed by Western psychology's focus on recovery (2014, 54). As noted in Chapter 2, Aslam places an emphasis on avoiding recovery-based narratives; to this end, Aslam adopts a narrative structure that allows for the trauma that has plagued Afghanistan to linger on in the physical space of the novel's setting, offering relentless reminders to characters and readers alike that this site has historically hosted a great deal of violence. As Sam Durrant notes in "Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning", this kind of narrative approach is characterised by a foregrounding of "rage" rather than the representation of unrealistic resolution (2014, 95). Contemplating the future of trauma theory, and drawing on David Lloyd's work on trauma and postcolonialism

[3] As noted earlier in this thesis, such approaches to the depiction of trauma as defying representation are built upon much criticised readings of traumatic memory as inherently unrepresentable (Caruth 1995). See pp.32-38.

in “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Mourning”, Durrant makes the case that “therapeutic” approaches to colonial trauma can be seen to “shore up the boundaries of the subject and the state”, allowing “postcolonial modernity” to go undisrupted (2014, 96); the representation of mourning—where mourning is understood as a mode of working through—as a response to trauma can, according to Durrant, collude “in the production of an illusory moment of reconciliation” (2014, 96). In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam rails against these representations of trauma, opting instead for what Durrant might describe as “recalcitrant” depictions that present colonial trauma as long-lasting and function as a mode of resistance (2014, 100).

In *The Blind Man’s Garden,* Aslam’s engagement with communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan subject to colonial trauma differs from his earlier tack in *The Wasted Vigil*. The focus in this later text on the immediate post-9/11 period means that Aslam is preoccupied with unfolding trauma rather than with those traumas that linger from past generations. Still, Aslam remains resistant to the depiction of traumatic loss, especially in a conflict zone, as something that can be merely grieved and forgotten. In Heer, we witness a community for whom the impact of the war in Afghanistan is just beginning to unfold; the damage that will be wrought as a result of the invasion is unknown at the outset of the novel and remains largely unsettled at its end. Due to his engagement with an ongoing conflict, Aslam’s approach to trauma in this novel cannot rely on the certainties offered by history—we do not yet know precisely what will come to pass as a result of the suffering engendered in these regions since 9/11. As a result, Aslam forgoes imagining potential futures for Heer or attempting to guess at the long-term impact of trauma and instead opts to depict the state of hauntedness that permeates this fictional community as it attempts to live within the liminal space of unresolved suffering.

By depicting the Heer community as haunted and making space for ghosts, Aslam presents Pakistan and by extension Afghanistan as spaces that have been, and remain, subject

to Western hegemony—in its various colonial forms—and adopts a mode of writing that reflects the persistent suffering engendered by such oppression. Craps advocates for the importance of ghosts in scholarship, and art, in ways that allow "for an ongoing politics of memory and a concern for justice" (2012, 61). Dealing specifically with the postcolonial context, Craps argues that the "post" in "post-colonial" can be seen to represent what is in many ways an "obfuscatory celebration" of erasure within the field (2012, 63).[4] For Craps, along with other major scholars, the designation of the "postcolonial" marks colonial occupation as a "matter of the past"—something which a given society has moved beyond (2012, 63). Craps argues that we must resist the impulse to confine difficult histories to the past and echoes Derrida to highlight the impossibility of a just future without acknowledging the "non-contemporaneity of the living present" (2012, 61); in other words, we must eschew the notion that we are beyond the reach of history and "learn to live with ghosts" (Craps 2012, 61).

In *The Blind Man's Garden,* Aslam forces us to do exactly this. Effectively, Aslam presents Mikal's disappearance and the grief it causes his loved ones as a microcosm of the impact of Western hegemony upon the region, past and present. Though Aslam is dealing with a recent loss and not one that has reverberated through generations unresolved, it nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which the interference of a foreign power can suspend an entire community in a state of purgatorial paralysis. The significance of this is clear when we consider that, as Durrant notes in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, the representation of haunting for writers of fiction can be a useful means of "bearing witness to histories of exclusion" (2004, 14). Examining the role of literature in memorialising "traumatic histories of racial oppression" haunting "our postcolonial era", Durrant suggests that "to open one's art to the fully realised presence of a haunting is to

[4] See also McClintock 1992.

practice what one might call a postcolonial ethics—and aesthetics—of hospitality" (2004, 14). In other words, to give space to ongoing trauma in this way can be a radical means of rejecting official memory narratives that either ignore or actively deny the existence of such suffering. For Aslam, the project of 'writing-back' to official memory narratives surrounding the post-9/11 wars in many ways demands such interventions and an active acknowledgment of the ways in which spaces like Abu Ghraib and other black sites create suffering beyond those individuals most obviously affected.

To this end neither the characters nor the reading audience are permitted to reconcile with Mikal's absence. Craps suggests Derrida's concept of "mid-mourning" as a useful framework through which to consider the depiction of traumatic loss as we witness it in Heer (2012). Mid-mourning is distinguished from Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia, wherein mourning describes the process of integrating "loss into consciousness" while melancholia describes a state of failed or refused "assimilation", wherein the loss is denied and "taken into the self as Other" (Craps 2012, 62). Craps distinguishes mid-mourning as a state of being that "hovers" somewhere between the two, denoting a "permanent state of tension" or a "continual working-over of a history which remains enigmatic and irreducibly other" (Craps 2012, 63). Mid-mourners such as Mikal's family are caught in the liminal space between mourning and melancholia; they are not able to accept the loss and commit to moving on; nor are they taken by the destructive oblivion of melancholia. Instead, they are forced to continually grapple with the fact of loss, the overwhelming confusion of which they experience as a haunting.

For Naheed, Jeo's widow and Mikal's erstwhile lover, the time of Mikal's imprisonment and exile is marked by waiting and an inability to accept his likely death. She exists in a liminal state that mirrors his as she grapples with a pregnancy—delaying termination in the hope that he might return—and covering herself in ash to mark Jeo's

passing. Naheed clings to the hope of Mikal's survival even as evidence mounts to the contrary; she argues that since "there is no body, there is no grave", there is no certainty as to his fate (Aslam 2013a, 106). Importantly, Aslam neither confirms nor dashes the credibility of Naheed's hope for the reader at this point in the novel; due to the placement of these sections in the narrative interlude between the raid at the Taliban compound and our next meeting with Mikal at the warlord's compound, we are as doubtful as Naheed. When Rohan finds a grave in Afghanistan that might belong to Mikal, we are forced to acknowledge the possibility that our protagonist might be dead. In a rather startling coincidence, the grave is marked by "Mikal's name, the date of birth, and of death—the day after he and Jeo went to Afghanistan" (Aslam 2013a, 124). Aslam's deliberate use of contrived coincidence—with the grave ultimately not belonging to Mikal—here serves to deny the reader sure-footing. To borrow a phrase from Craps, we might read Aslam's narrative objective as resisting the "temptation to leave the reader with the sense that the story has been told, consigned to the past" (2012, 60).

Aslam does eventually confirm Mikal's survival as we re-join him in Afghanistan and follow his ordeal at the brick factory; our next return to Heer follows directly on from Mikal's animalistic outburst when David mentions Naheed during an interrogation session. Looking up from a book on her lap, Naheed watches as the "gate [opens] to admit Mikal" (Aslam 2013a, 191). Naheed approaches him but stops halfway, wondering if "it is his ghost, here to convince her to build a life without him" or if he is "real and her thinking has summoned him to her presence" (Aslam 2013a, 191). Aslam does not give the reader any insight into which, if either, interpretation is correct. To our knowledge at this point, it might be feasible that the narrative has skipped ahead to Mikal's release and his return to Heer, or perhaps he has been murdered for his outburst at the prison and Naheed is genuinely encountering a ghost. In either case, Naheed's nonchalance regarding the possibility that she

has encountered a ghost demonstrates the extent to which she has become accustomed to her state of hauntedness. Ultimately, by lending narrative space to her haunting, Aslam represents here the only recourse for witnessing available to an individual made to vanish in the same fashion as Mikal. Without her grief, and with the absence of a body to mourn over, Mikal's death would be consigned to the statistics recording those that leave such communities and never return.

Of course, Aslam's representation of mid-mourning in Heer is also significant in its focus on the gendered aspect of such grief. Aslam's depiction of ghost-making in Afghanistan and Pakistan mirrors the real-world dynamics of such processes, as it is invariably males depicted as terrorists and removed from their communities. As McClintock notes, the age and gender profile of individuals captured and subjected to torture in places like Abu Ghraib is varied; women, children and the elderly are rounded up alongside the young, able-bodied men who more readily fit the stereotype of the terrorist figure (2009, 67). Nevertheless, the demographics of those captured obviously skew heavily toward the latter as the group most easily identified as believably threatening. Thus it is individuals such as Mikal that preoccupy popular Western imaginings of the Muslim Other coded as terrorist; his likeness is irretrievably associated with the figure of the enemy. The figure of the Muslim woman, while not demonised to the same extent, experiences an erasure that is arguably just as damaging. The narrative surrounding women in countries like Afghanistan or Pakistan is primarily concerned with their oppression. These women are mysterious figures imagined as possessing little agency, a perception we see most clearly illustrated in discussions regarding the veil, as noted in Chapter 2. Western readings of this garment, in its various forms, tend to assume that it denotes submissiveness or at best acquiescence to oppressive patriarchal power structures. As Egyptian novelist, essayist and translator Ahdaf Soueif notes in *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground,* such readings fail to acknowledge the complexities

attendant to donning the veil, from religious devotion, to cultural reclamation, to forceful political statements (2004). Western commentators are instead intent on reductive understandings, invoking disingenuous concern to justify Orientalist attitudes toward Muslim cultures. This concern is frequently masking apathy toward the genuine suffering of these women who are aggrieved by the disappearance of their male counterparts. The haunting experienced by women such as Naheed is shrouded in silence, ignored to the extent that they too are made ghostly in their absence from political discourse surrounding sites like Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo.

Rohan's grief, meanwhile, leads him away from Heer and sees him travel to Afghanistan several times to attempt to come to terms with Jeo's passing. On one such trip, he travels with a man whose young son has been held captive by an Afghan warlord. As Rohan witnesses the brutal conditions in which the boy has been held, he notices a photo on the wall capturing the moment that American forces met with the warlord; Aslam's narrator draws on Rohan's frustration as he muses on the contradictions of war. The narrator concludes that the "opposite of war is not peace but civilisation, and civilisation is purchased with violence and cold-blooded murder"— "with war" (Aslam 2013a, 126). Here, Aslam exposes the degree of hypocritical violence underpinning American global dominance; Rohan, his family and others like them in this region are not granted the protection of "civilisation". Instead they are forced to exist on the unfortunate end of a binary understanding of what "civilisation" is and to whom it belongs; they experience the murder and bloodshed that allows the façade of peace to flourish elsewhere.

In a misguided attempt to correct some of this injustice, Rohan demands that a convoy of American soldiers intervene in the warlord's inhumane treatment of his prisoners. Rohan is eventually dragged away by the warlord's men and blinded with the shards of a crushed gem that he attempted to exchange for the boy's freedom. We might read this loss of

sight as symbolising the determination of those upholding the status quo to quash any signs of dissent or dawning awareness in the downtrodden masses—the scapegoated Other—of their own oppression. Significantly, this incident marks a shift in Aslam's depiction of traumatic loss in Heer. While Rohan's mourning might not necessarily be described as melancholic since we get little insight into the nature of his experience and the extent to which he has accepted his loss, his less passive response to the injustice of American-inflicted suffering nevertheless indicates the ways in which Naheed's paralysed state of hauntedness is not the only reaction to grief.

In Major Kyra, leader of a local extremist group, and his young cohorts, we encounter an altogether more volatile response to traumatic loss that ultimately culminates in a turn toward extremist behaviour and which can be broadly categorised as melancholic. In order to analyse the significance of Aslam's representation of melancholia, it is necessary to expand upon the definitions previously provided in this chapter. As noted, Freudian understandings of melancholia mark it as distinct from mourning in its failure or refusal to integrate "loss into consciousness" (Craps 2012, 62). According to Tammy Clewell, Freud's early writings on mourning describe it as a process whereby the individual engages in "reality testing" (2004, 44). Through "obsessive recollection" or "hyperremembering" of the "lost object", the individual is able to "assess the value of the relationship and comprehend what he or she has lost in losing the other" (Clewell 2004, 44). In this way, the individual comes "to an objective determination that the lost object no longer exists", at which point the mourning process is complete (Clewell 2004, 44). As Clewell notes, Freud later came to revise this understanding of mourning and to regard it as a process of "interminable labour", or in other words as a process that never quite finds resolution (2004, 61). Where the loss can be regarded as "very significant", as in the case of a loved one, there may be no recourse to the substitution of the love object, leaving the mourner "inconsolable" (cited in Clewell 2004, 61).

Though this revised understanding of mourning collapses some of the distinctions between it and melancholia, Freud's original conceptualisation of the latter remains nonetheless useful for our reading of Aslam's representation of extremist violence as a result of traumatic loss in Heer. Distinct from both mourning and mid-mourning, the melancholic condition is primarily characterised by "incorporation" (Clewell 2004, 50). In this state, the inability or refusal to accept or acknowledge loss is not experienced externally as a haunting, but "encrypted into the body" where it becomes part of the self as an internalised Other and a source of conflict and turmoil (Clewell 2004, 50). Clewell draws on Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's influential analysis of Freudian melancholia in "Mourning and Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation" to note that incorporation typically occurs "when a traumatic memory associated with the other renders introjection impossible" (2004, 50). This assertion holds true for Major Kyra and his commanders, whose melancholia results not simply from the personal loss of loved ones—though this is also the case for many of the young men involved—but from traumatic encounters with war and the loss of nationalistic pride. This is significant, of course, since the Freudian understanding of mourning and melancholia gives equal consideration to the loss of a person or of "one's country, liberty and ideal, and so on" (cited in Clewell 2004, 44).

Like Rohan, these young men have become aware of the ways in which the price for peace and "civilisation" in the West is paid with their blood and the blood of others like them. In sections detailing the lead-up to their raid on a local Christian school, Aslam focuses particularly on the mindsets of those involved. In this way, Aslam gives the reader insight into their motivations and demonstrates that these go far beyond religious fervour or a straightforward commitment to mayhem. Aslam's depiction of extremism and its root causes here avoids fulfilling simplistic stereotypes of the reactionary extremist whose violent proclivities merely awaited a catalyst, in part due to Mikal's earlier characterisation as

someone who experiences similar encounters with American hegemony and is not radicalised; Aslam thus allows his Pakistani characters to demonstrate diversity of thought and response to traumatic events.

The raid itself parallels the American-led seizure of the Taliban compound in which Jeo was killed, highlighting the frequency of such incidents and the capacity for violence on both sides of the conflict. In Ahmed, Kyra's next-in-command, Aslam presents a young man for whom melancholic despair is a driving force. We are told that he witnessed death in Afghanistan, having learned there what "two hundred corpses looked like" (Aslam 2013a, 261). Having seen men from Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia "slain, slaughtered, stinking" and "cleansed of the last burden of being who they were on earth", Ahmed is enraged at the notion that peace "reigned at that very moment on other parts of the planet" (Aslam 2013a, 262); he curses the "lives that were continuing uninterrupted elsewhere" (Aslam 2013a, 262).

The chosen target for the raid demonstrates the degree of wounded pride among the young men involved; they discuss the fact that the teachers at the school fill the "heads of the children with un-Islamic things like music and biology and English literature", while referring to children at Islamic schools as "donkeys" (Aslam 2013a, 170). Importantly, Aslam does not offer commentary on whether the grievances expressed here are based in fact; instead, he places narrative focus on the intensity of the humiliation felt by the young men. They express shame at Pakistan's standing within the international community, lamenting the fact that they are "the world's seventh nuclear power" and yet the "government does the bidding of the Americans", reducing them to "beggars" (Aslam 2013a, 169). In a fashion that recalls Mikal's anger at the state of Pakistan earlier in the narrative, the young men express exasperation at Pakistan's apparent willingness to submit to the subjugation inflicted by Western states. In this way, Kyra and his men display what Clewell, following Freud, might

regard as “ambivalence”—a common marker of melancholia wherein the sufferer regards the lost love object with “feelings of love and hate” (2004, 59). As part of the melancholic condition, the boys are caught in a conflicted space where they must grapple simultaneously with intense love for Pakistan, and equally intense hatred or what Clewell might term “disappointment” with the ways in which it has failed to realise their expectations (2004, 59).

This ambivalence ultimately results in a very specific form of violence as they attempt to make sense of their conflicted allegiances. As noted, the melancholic incorporates the lost object into themselves as Other; as such, for Kyra and his men, the ambivalence they feel toward Pakistan has been internalised so that the pride and disgust they level at Pakistan is also aimed inward. According to Clewell, this internalised ambivalence can manifest for the melancholic in a desire for “self-punishment” as a “means of taking revenge on the lost other” (2004, 60). Thus the violence they commit at the school is meted out at numerous targets, reflecting a complex set of motivations. Their choice of primary target in Father Mede might appear initially as born from practical considerations; however, given their melancholic disposition, we might more accurately read this as reflecting an awareness of their own status as Other, as “twenty or thirty Pakistanis, be they Christian or Muslim, dying in an explosion in Pakistan isn’t going to matter at all” (Aslam 2013a, 169). Father Mede is chosen because “he is white” and “an Englishman” and so his death is likely to “become an international affair” (Aslam 2013a, 170). Kyra and his men reasonably conclude that the West will “pay attention if something happens to a white person” (Aslam 2013a, 170).

The simultaneous murder of numerous Pakistanis, meanwhile, is not motivated by a desire to attract international attention. Kyra and his cohorts understand that killing such people will not result in the same degree of outrage, a fact that only serves to deepen their ire. Instead, the targeting of Pakistani civilians at the school is based on their status as perceived traitors to the national ideal as people who willingly submit to Western cultural influence in

the region. The young men murder a teacher, referring to him as a "running dog of imperialism" (Aslam 2013a, 268). They also seek out and kill Mikal's brother Basie, another teacher at the school and someone whom Kyra regards with particular fury. Aslam presents these killings not as arbitrary assassinations of those whose values and beliefs do not align with a particular interpretation of Islam, but as attempts to excise internalised shame. Major Kyra, Ahmed and their followers have come to see themselves through Western eyes as the degraded Other; in their melancholic condition, they wrestle with their role in a country that is continually debased, due in large part to its affiliations with groups that regard themselves as Islamic fundamentalists. The notion that the West's condescension is based primarily on those elements of Pakistani culture that they prize above all else—its relationship to Islam—torments Kyra and his followers. As a result, they rail against those individuals within their own culture that seem to affirm the judgement of outsiders who deem them Other and inferior, asking the teacher before his execution if he thinks they "don't deserve [his] respect?" (Aslam 2013a, 268). By making "an example out of" Basie, they lash out in denial at those parts of themselves that recognise decency in him—a decency that should be impossible given his role as a teacher in a Christian school and which, in their trauma, they read as mocking (Aslam 2013a, 269). Rendered impotent by global power structures that pre-emptively determined this as their fate, they succumb with shame to the actions expected of them. In presenting two such oppositional responses to loss in Naheed and Kyra, Aslam demonstrates the chaos wrought when widespread dehumanisation of individuals and entire cultures causes communities to break down and when trauma finds an outlet in further violence.

Conclusion

In the concluding sections of Aslam's narrative, characters attempt to deal with the fallout from the raid and all of the loss experienced up to this point. Mikal's return from exile

comes as a shock to Naheed who, though still sceptical of his death, had become accustomed to his ghostly presence. Mikal's time at home is limited as he is compelled to travel to South Waziristan as a favour to the al-Qaeda affiliate with whom he found refuge while in exile. Aslam frames these final sections of the narrative as a quest for redemption for Mikal. Despite the provocation and trauma he suffered, Mikal does not absolve himself of responsibility for the deaths of the two military policemen. He comments to Naheed that these men likely had "mothers, fathers, probably wives and children" and as such he must "pay for the crime" (Aslam 2013a, 322). Naheed insists that some of the "blame lies with them" but Mikal is not convinced (Aslam 2013a, 322); having returned to Heer and having witnessed the grief that his absence and Jeo's death engendered, Mikal is now acutely aware of the ways in which such losses have impact beyond the individuals directly involved.

In this way, Aslam positions Mikal as a narrative conduit through which to explore the possibility, or impossibility, of resolution or conciliation for those who have fallen afoul of worsening global conflict. Having dedicated earlier sections of the narrative to detailing the various sufferings heaped on non-Western populations as a result of the 'war on terror', Aslam now traces the possibility of resolution or healing. Aslam ponders whether it is possible for someone like Mikal to make amends for his transgressions and receive justice for his own sufferings, thereby recovering his personhood and regaining his agency. Aslam creates an allegory for global conflict, placing Mikal into contact with an American soldier and, through their interactions, foregrounds the challenges that impede the progress of cross-cultural relations. Significantly, beyond the motivation it affords Mikal, the suffering previously highlighted in Heer is abandoned as a narrative focus in these concluding sections; in a fashion that reflects attitudes in the West toward the trauma of people in non-Western spaces, the ongoing suffering in Heer is ultimately rendered irrelevant to the trajectory of the plot.

While driving, Mikal comes across the body of an American soldier lying prone in the road. Mikal initially assumes the man to be a Djinn but, seeing that he carries a snow leopard that Mikal had encountered while in exile, he wraps the man in chains and places him in the back of his truck. Mikal's motivation here is to locate a missing woman that had lived at the house where he had encountered the cub. Aslam once again employs coincidence as a narrative device—this time used to cement the allegorical framework—as it transpires that the unnamed soldier is the brother of one of the officers that Mikal killed. The soldier recalls details about Mikal's captivity such as the fact that he "never revealed his name" (Aslam 2013a, 333); for the soldier, this is "indication enough that he was a hardened terrorist, most probably belonging to the upper echelons of al-Qaeda" (Aslam 2013a, 333). The soldier is adamant that Mikal should have been taken to "Cuba for complete and advanced interrogation", citing the fact that "he shot dead two Americans the *instant* he was released" as justification (Aslam 2013a, 333, emphasis in original). Of course, such claims might seem perfectly reasonable in a different context; reading about a prisoner freed from an interrogation site who resorted to violence might convince even sceptical onlookers of Mikal's guilt. However, due to Aslam's diligence earlier in the novel, we come to the soldier's claims armed with nuance on the context of Mikal's actions. We recognise the soldier's understanding of the situation as startlingly incomplete or determinedly simplistic, mistakenly adamant that as a "Military Policeman his brother had never violated the rules" (Aslam 2013a, 334); we remember the torture and the traumatised paranoia that led Mikal to murder and, as such, Aslam succeeds in making sure his readers are appalled by the framing employed here by the American surrogate to abdicate responsibility.

Significantly, we are informed that there is presently an investigation into "how such a shrewd and astute prisoner, who was clearly a threat to the United States and to peace in this region, was given his freedom" (Aslam 2013a, 333). Through this phrasing, Aslam

identifies our newly introduced character as a believer in American exceptionalism; the soldier sees his role, and that of his fellow military operatives in the region, as facilitators of peace and the increased safety of mankind. This necessarily precludes consideration of the populations of Afghanistan and Pakistan—those that have been pre-determined as threatening—as human beings with motivations and provocations of their own. The soldier laments the "difficult" nature of the work done in the prison camps, where the "innocent and the guilty both weep in interrogation rooms, leaving wet spots on the material of the jumpsuits as they wipe large tears on their shoulders" (Aslam 2013a, 333). The wounded party in this scenario is not the tortured individual wrongly accused and weeping over his treatment; it is the official who must attempt to distinguish between degrees of guilt among those whom they have already designated as being the bearers of "ontological guilt", as Edward Said put it (1997b, lxvi).

Within this construction, there is no room for meaningful self-reflection or the recognition of having played a role in radicalisation or the cultivation of such desperation and despair as we saw in Mikal. Thus we quickly understand that Aslam's goal is not the naïve representation of cross-cultural understanding as the two men come to engage in a cathartic exchange of experiences and perspectives. Instead, Aslam reduces the complicated realm of global political and ideological intransigence to an interaction between two individuals; we bear witness as they fail to communicate, the absurdity—and yet unflinching realism—of their irreducible separation across cultural lines becoming increasingly apparent despite the similarities they share. Both men have lost brothers to the war in Afghanistan and, when we meet the soldier, he appears to share Mikal's affinity for "navigating by the stars" (Aslam 2013a, 334). Beyond such obvious similarities, Aslam seems to link them together through space and time; they are each responsible, whether directly or indirectly, for the suffering of the other. Aslam presents the possibility of equal accountability for suffering, only to

ultimately deny the realisation of such wish-fulfilment and reaffirm narrative dedication to the depiction of injustice.

As Mikal takes the soldier prisoner, Aslam makes it clear that the role-reversal is merely superficial. Though the soldier's predicament somewhat resembles Mikal's time at the prison in that he is unable to communicate with his captor, for example, the nameless soldier is never debased or degraded in the same way. Even as the soldier is arguably reduced to bare life, the political entity that his body is charged with representing—the United States— remains so powerful and so fearsome that Mikal is never able to attain the upper-hand. The formidable physical presence of the soldier marks a sharp contrast to Mikal's weakened state while in captivity. Mikal is stunned as he assesses the soldier's size, noting that he "is bull-necked and his body is hard, containing muscles full of health in every place" (Aslam 2013a, 347). With a "half-ton of chains around his muscles", Mikal finally feels secure enough to begin asking questions, demanding information regarding the girl for whom he is searching. Of course, the language barrier precludes effective communication. This difficulty recalls earlier sections of the narrative where the imprisoned Mikal was unable to answer his captors' questions. However, Aslam distinguishes between the power dynamics at play in these scenarios by having a consistently armed Mikal affirm both his wariness of the soldier and his intention to do him no harm by assuring the leopard cub that he is "not going to hurt" his "new friend" (Aslam 2013a, 351).

Aslam continues to frame the soldier's body as untouchable as Mikal brings him to a local cleric's home where he hopes someone might be able to address him in English. The sight of the soldier immediately inspires fear in the people that Mikal encounters here; they instinctually understand the threat his physical presence represents, connecting the soldier to both historical and present-day violence. Far from representing the celebrated forces of liberation or even the embodiment of loathed Western values, the soldier instead functions as

a stand-in for a powerful, yet cowardly, Western world led by an American superpower and responsible for great suffering. The cleric comments that he has “never seen a white person before” and that “during the First World War” they “used biplanes to drop bombs” and were as such reviled for the “cowardice” demonstrated in “killing while out of reach” (Aslam 2013a, 352). Despite their anger and apparent control over the situation, the locals recognise the danger inherent in interacting with the man, even in tending his wounds “out in the open” (Aslam 2013a, 353); they tell Mikal that they “know people who don’t want to even look at a picture” of an American for fear of being killed (Aslam 2013a, 353).

In this way, Aslam demonstrates the potency of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism in particular; unlike the medics at the prison, the locals here have been conditioned to regard the soldier with a degree of unassailable autonomy born from his nationality which they dare not transgress. In this sense, the body of the soldier occupies a fraught space within the biopolitical sphere of sovereign politics. As a soldier sent to do the bidding of the state, in a role that necessarily threatens his survival, we can recognise him as a form of bare life. Of course, this characterisation is vehemently rejected by official narratives that frame the deaths of soldiers as sacrificial— sacrifices made freely for the strengthening of the state (Edkins 2003, 102). However, Edkins points out the contradiction inherent to this framing, as sacrificial deaths by definition do not prompt “vengeance” (2003, 102). As we have seen through Mikal’s exile, the deaths of American soldiers in regions like Afghanistan are certainly not treated with the placid acceptance suggested by the notion of sacrifice; the bodies of these men and women, living and dead, are the site of ongoing political struggle. This contradiction notwithstanding, as an agent of the dominant global power, the soldier cannot be made to experience the same dehumanisation as Mikal earlier in the narrative. Though the soldier may well be little more than a cog in a careless war machine, the people who hold him captive in Pakistan do not have the power to strip him of

his personhood. They do not possess the structural capacity to deny his subjectivity; attempts to do so will prove unsuccessful given the determination of the dominant power to reaffirm his grievability in service of a narrative that makes monsters of his captors.

Mikal convinces the cleric to perform a cursory examination, which reveals a tattoo on the soldier's back that reads "infidel" (Aslam 2013a, 355). Significantly, the narrator notes that the tattoo is not in English, "which would have meant that [the soldier] had done it for himself, or for others like him in his own country" (Aslam 2013a, 355). Instead, the tattoo is written in "the Urdu and Pashto script" and so they determine that "it is meant for the people *here"* (Aslam 2013a, 255, emphasis in original). The narrator comments that the tattoo insinuates that the man is "taunting" and "boasting", loudly proclaiming that he is "proud to be an infidel, to be this thing you hate" (Aslam 2013a, 355). The soldier demonstrates an understanding of his status as a person whose birthplace renders his life more valuable than those he encounters. Unlike Mikal, the soldier can eschew cordiality toward the Other and ignore concerns of cultural sensitivity, secure in the knowledge that his American citizenship will likely protect him from the consequences of such behaviour. The tattoo is a sign of self-demarcated difference—the soldier is marking himself as above the primitive religious notions held by those deemed Other; these are to be flouted as the ridiculous signifiers of an inferior culture.

The presence of the tattoo forces Mikal to leave the cleric's home for fear that the local men might seek to harm the soldier for his transgression; Mikal remains a fugitive due to his killing of the American officers earlier in the narrative and is now faced with the added burden of protecting the soldier as they embark on an adventure quest with an increasingly fantastical array of foes and trials. Eventually they are captured by a local warlord who frees Mikal but keeps the soldier in captivity. Aslam utilises this turn of events to bring the themes of the novel to a crescendo; once the soldier is captured, Mikal is freed from the burden of his

presence and must decide whether to mount a rescue mission. Though Mikal views a rescue as a means of rectifying his past and achieving redemption for his sins, Aslam frames his protagonist's reasoning here as rather ridiculous and ill-conceived. Mikal speaks to an older servant in the warlord's home whose hopelessness regarding the relations between the West and the East is long-embedded. Mikal tells the man about his own captivity, garnering a response that bears a startling resemblance to the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. The servant assures Mikal that they "can't know what Westerners want" and that to acquire such knowledge one would "have to be born where they are born," "eat what they eat, wear what they wear, breathe the air they breathe" (Aslam 2013a, 390); the man insists, arguing that "the divide is too great, too final", that "it's like asking what the dead or the unborn know" (Aslam 2013a, 390).

If the servant is to be believed, there is no solution to deepening ideological intransigence across the globe; there will be no moment of healing as one side comes to understand the other and similarities are recognised, putting an end to decades of death and suffering. Mikal offers a rather meek rejoinder that perhaps literature will be our redeemer, that "we can learn things from books" (Aslam 2013a, 390); here, we might recognise Aslam speaking through Mikal to advocate for the potential of art to lessen global strife. However, despite the reprieve offered by this brief foray into optimism, Mikal's statement serves to remind us of the lessened focus on literature in this text compared to Aslam's earlier novels. *The Wasted Vigil* in particular strongly emphasised the importance of fiction and literature in general in overcoming cross-cultural division. That narrative unfolded in a house where books were prized possessions, nailed to the ceilings as a reminder that occupants had died protecting education and literacy. *The Blind Man's Garden* contains within it no such declarations of affection for literature as a medium that can behave as a talisman against hatred and bigotry; the schoolhouse in Heer has long been a training-ground for extremists

and the featured characters, though many are teachers, make few advancements in their community through education.

This apparent hopelessness is perhaps a product of the worsening global conflict referenced throughout this chapter. In the years between Aslam's third and fourth novels, literature and other media have arguably made few inroads in the fight to mitigate the dangerous ignorance and prejudice that exists at both ends of the 'war on terror'. Though grim and frustrating in its bloody ending, *The Wasted Vigil* still operated as a text that gestured toward hope, playing out, as a deterrent, what would inevitably occur if we did not learn to account for the humanity of the Other; it contained, even at its bleakest points, evidence that human beings could, like David Town, come to see the harm wrought by ideological intransigence. In *The Blind Man's Garden* Aslam does not, of course, deny outright the potential for improved cross-cultural relations in the future; rather, as noted, his focus is simply elsewhere, opting to produce a record of the stories of loss and love that unfold in spaces plagued by relentless conflict.

The tragedy of the narrative continues to mount as it comes to a close. Mikal attempts to save the American soldier from certain death and, as best we can ascertain, dies for his trouble. Significantly, after Mikal calls in American troops to save his companion, the novel's perspective switches briefly to that of the soldier. Perhaps due to Mikal's kindness, we very briefly encounter a glimpse of a changed perspective as the commandos promise, presumably echoing the soldier's description, that they will "go back and attempt to look for the boy with the leopard cub" (Aslam 2013a, 399). This description of Mikal as a boy holding a leopard cub represents a shift from the soldier's earlier certainty that the man who killed his brother—identified as Mikal by specific injuries to his hands—could be none other than a hardened terrorist. The soldier is unable to discern who precisely he saw "with a red knot on the upper part of the forehead and several lines running down from it to spread out

over the features" (Aslam 2013a, 399); Mikal dies as he lived—in a state of tragic and brutal anonymity. Though we might read the soldier's apparent sadness over Mikal's likely death as a positive indication that reconciliation between the two sides is possible, it is important to acknowledge the broader implications of this passage that refute such readings. However softened the soldier might be to his erstwhile companion, he nevertheless exits the narrative via a Chinook that is "rising into the air" above the fray while "some of the soldiers are leaning out and firing downwards" (Aslam 2013a, 399). He is absorbed back into the military apparatus of the most powerful nation on earth, while Mikal is left behind to perish, or, in any case, disappear.

In many ways, Aslam frames Mikal's death as inevitable. There is simply no recourse to his survival; the mythology underpinning American exceptionalism and broader Western hegemonic power simply cannot permit it. Mikal's redemption would have depended upon the admittance of wrongdoing on the part of the US military and the acknowledgement of the mitigating circumstances that precipitated his traumatised outburst. Mikal's death means that he is never permitted to strip the soldier of the illusion that his brother was never party to any violence at the prison, or to prove that the violence depicted at sites such as Abu Ghraib and the brick factory was in fact endemic; nor did the soldiers have to make the difficult and equally disillusioning decision to deliberately execute Mikal in order to maintain his silence. The consequences of this grim trade-off are discovered as we return to Heer to find that Naheed has had Mikal's child and, due to nature of his disappearance and the fact that his death is never confirmed, she still awaits his return. As Mikal walks through the gate to Rohan's garden one final time we are reasonably sure—due to the time that has passed and Aslam's move away from Mikal's narrative perspective during the soldier's rescue—that he is but a ghost.

In this way, we are left with the image of a haunted home in Pakistan with lives forever marked by mourning. *The Blind Man's Garden* does seem to concede the possibility that the conflicts sharpened by 9/11 are unlikely to find resolution in the pages of even the most insightful novel. However, as a result, this text, like its predecessor, refuses to elide or gloss over the difficulties faced in dealing with ideological entrenchment. With *The Blind Man's Garden* Aslam demonstrates a relentless insistence upon the importance of the marginal perspective for its own sake, responding to worsening polarities in global politics with an unapologetic, and at times brutal, commitment to the notion that, even if not ultimately politically transformative, it is vital that these stories are told and acknowledged as part of the broader human experience.

4

Agents of War: Patriotism, Perpetrator Trauma and the Iraq War in Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*

> "Billy suspects his fellow Americans secretly know better, but something in the land is stuck on teenage drama, on extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence and soothing mud wallows of self-justifying pity".
>
> Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* 2012, 11)

Introduction

On 20 March 2003, the second conflict of the 'war on terror' began with the invasion of Iraq by an American-led coalition. The invasion was dubbed 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', a name reflecting the rhetorical framing that had surrounded the incursion in the months leading to its launch. As Douglas Kellner notes in "The Bush Administration's March to War", the invasion was representative of a significant shift in US foreign policy (2005, vii). Moving away from the "Cold War doctrine of containment and deterrence" toward one of "pre-emptive strikes", the Bush Administration launched a targeted media campaign that sought to justify the invasion of a sovereign nation unrelated to the 9/11 attacks, but under the pretence of fighting terrorism (Kellner 2005, vii). The resulting military campaign lasted until 2011; according to the Iraq Body Count Project, estimates of Iraqi civilian and combatant deaths range from between 112,000 to 174,000 over the course of the conflict—a number that continues to grow.

This chapter explores the literary response to the Iraq War as a conflict plagued by controversy. Earlier chapters in this thesis examine the invasion of Afghanistan from the perspective of authors whose work contravenes official Western rhetoric and media framings. As post-9/11 authors, Khaled Hosseini's and Nadeem Aslam's work gives voice to non-Western perspectives and those typically marginalised in memorial discourse, particularly American memorial discourse. The texts produced by these authors and featured in this thesis function as media with the power to displace notions that 9/11 was a strictly American, or even Western, tragedy; instead, they explore the ways in which the attacks represent a global moment of reckoning and, for Afghanistan in particular, marked only an extension of the suffering experienced due to the interference of foreign powers. Hosseini and Aslam, to varied extents, trace the origins of this suffering into Afghanistan's long history with the West, framing the violence of foreign hegemonic powers as the root cause for much present-day turmoil. Shifting focus away from the perspectives represented in these texts, this chapter explores Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*) and Phil Klay (*Redeployment*), as American authors whose work depicts the suffering that befalls soldiers charged with representing American interests during the war in Iraq. I argue that these authors challenge media framings that promote American exceptionalism and dangerous forms of nationalism emerging after 9/11; they highlight the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the phenomenon of perpetrator trauma as a means of rejecting narratives of heroic masculinity linked to the nation, revealing them as dangerous instead.

However, I also argue that while these authors are successful in unmasking post-9/11 intervention in Iraq as a cynical and imperialistic endeavour, they do not adequately consider the suffering of Iraqi civilians. I question whether by focusing their wrath on the American state as an entity that sacrifices its soldiers as 'bare life', perpetuating trauma, economic inequality and mistreatment of women within a specifically American context, Fountain and

Klay distract from the ways in which *Iraq* is devastated by the invasion, continuing to experience its aftershocks to the present day.

Transnational Memory after 9/11

As described in the introduction to this thesis, in the post-9/11 period, memorial processes—and the political discourse they exist within—are less and less confined by the boundaries of the nation state (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Bond, Craps and Vermeulen 2017). As Michael Rothberg argues in his influential 2009 work *Multidirectional Memory,* while national memorial processes have a significant function in the formation of national identities and therefore the stability of the nation state, memory traditions can just as easily be shared between nations and cultures (2009, 20); movement of memory across borders and cultural divisions can provide frameworks for understanding current events that are not necessarily grounded in one's own national history (Rothberg 2009, 20). For Rothberg, the concept of multidirectional memory operates similarly to transnational memory—most of the current work in this area following Rothberg's lead—in that memory need not be a "zero-sum game" in which differing memory versions emerge from distinct geographical or cultural locations to compete for a limited availability of recognition (2009, 20); instead, Rothberg envisions a memory discourse characterised by openness and exchange. Rothberg conceptualises the Holocaust in particular as a cultural touchstone within memory discourse and argues that "far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition", it has instead "contributed to the articulation of other histories" (2009, 6). According to Rothberg, many critics have come to regard the Holocaust as a "screen memory" (2009, 12). Developed from Freudian theories of individual memory processes, a screen memory functions somewhat problematically as a substitute or stand-in for "a more disturbing or painful memory that it displaces from consciousness" (Rothberg 2009, 13).

For Rothberg, an ideal use of multidirectional memory, or individual screen memories, sees tragedies like the Holocaust aid societies in coming to grasp other traumas and vice versa (2009, 14). However, this process is marked by pitfalls, especially when one considers the potential for silencing when well-known Western traumas are used as stand-ins or frames of reference for suffering experienced in other spaces, in this case spaces marginalised in the post-9/11 context. Rothberg acknowledges the "plentiful evidence of violence and willed oblivion that can accompany hegemonic acts of remembrance" (2009, 19); this is of particular concern when traumas suffered in Western spaces dominate memory discourse over those in regions like Afghanistan and Iraq, to the extent that they silence or eclipse such suffering altogether. Rothberg's work does not attempt to conceal or ignore the potential for abuse that is contained within transactional modes of memory discourse but is "written under the sign of optimism", with a focus on the potential for justice also contained within such exchanges (2009, 19).

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, despite this willingness to accept the imbalance in hegemonic memory discourse—a willingness universal among critics named here—Bond, in *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics and Law*, remarks that attention to the "unbounded ethical potential" of multidirectional or transnational memory often fails to adequately account for the realities of such transactions (2015, 89). Bond pinpoints as an area of concern the gulf between "optimistic paradigms of memory outlined in scholarly criticism" and the "problematic dynamics of material memorial culture" (2015, 89). Bond draws on the work of Terri Tomsky, who details the ways in which traumatic memories are communicated and valued across time and various contexts (2015, 89). Tomsky's concept of the "trauma economy" describes a "circuit of movement and exchange whereby traumatic memories are "mediated by 'economic, cultural, discursive and political structures'", each of these playing a role in how traumas find representation in

collective memory (cited in Bond 2015, 89). Ultimately, traumas like the Holocaust or 9/11 find "hegemonic capital through their cultural visibility, political impact, and social, ideological, or even economic, weighting" (Bond 2015, 89). These traumas then become the standard-bearers for suffering in any given situation; whether or not there exists an unlimited human capacity to acknowledge suffering, our frames of reference nevertheless remain limited to a few key historical events against which all other atrocities are measured.

In this way, the potentially problematic aspects of memorial processes after 9/11 create a complex working environment for writers like Klay and Fountain, intervening in what is an undeniably transnational, and imbalanced, discourse. In the shadow of a new American imperative for global justice given weight by its association with the Holocaust, the trauma subsequently, and historically, suffered in Afghanistan and Iraq is rendered all but irrelevant, a footnote to a narrative of American national recovery. As we will see, even writers determined to undermine this righteousness and reveal these invasions as dangerous imperial endeavours can fail to adequately make room for silenced perspectives, limited by their own submersion in the hegemonic trauma narrative. This failure is almost understandable when viewed within the context of what Bond describes as a systematic effort to reconcile the 9/11 attacks with the US understanding of itself as exceptional. Cultural memory of the Holocaust, put to use as a "floating signifier" made to "serve multiple agendas" (2015, 97), facilitated what Bond calls a "resurgent nationalism" in the US (2015, 91).

In the case of Iraq, the invocation of the Holocaust had very specific implications. Cries of duty and 'never again' resounded in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, recalling the horror of the Holocaust and insisting upon a global rejection of the atrocities. According to Bond these rhetorical comparisons had "the related effect of deploying America's enemies in the guise of history's most exemplary evil…Hitler and the Nazi regime" (2015, 116). While

the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 required little public persuasion following 9/11, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a decidedly more complex prospect. The Iraqi regime had no ties to the attacks and, unlike the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, were not thought to be harbouring Osama bin Laden. As such, in order to justify invasion and occupation, Saddam Hussein had to be positioned as an existential threat to the West, a feat achieved by singling his regime out as the inheritors of the destructive capacity of the Third Reich.

In reality, of course, the motivation to invade Iraq and topple Saddam's regime pre-dates the 9/11 attacks. As Kellner notes, a report commissioned in 2000 entitled "Rebuilding America's Defences: Strategies, Forces and Resources for a New American Century" outlined a proposed shift in US foreign policy toward a more aggressive approach (2005, xii). The report was authorised by, among others, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, all of whom went on to play leading roles in the Bush Administration and were especially influential in the realm of foreign policy. According to Kellner, the report outlined a "plan for US world hegemony grounded in US military dominance" (2005, xii). While this mission statement is vague, the document indicates several specific areas of interest that the "neoconservative" element of American politics wished to pursue in the new millennium (Kellner 2005, xii). Among these were access to, and control of, oil in the Persian Gulf—by military means if necessary (Kellner 2005, xii). Broader goals envisaged the direct protection of American hegemonic power by "precluding the rise of a great power rival" and "shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests" (cited in Kellner 2005, xii). Such statements indicate that a war in Iraq may have been inevitable even before 9/11 offered the opportunity for a legitimate shift in foreign policy. As Kellner notes, Iraq was merely the first country on the agenda; the report states clearly that the "unresolved conflict with Iraq"—presumably citing the first Gulf War of the early 1990s—could have provided the "immediate justification" but that the "need for substantial American presence

in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein" (2005, xii). Following this line of thought, conflict with Iran and "regime change" in countries like China were flagged as desirable (Kellner 2005, xii).

After the 9/11 attacks this turn toward a more overt militarism was cemented when the Bush Administration "released a document signalling some of the most important and far-reaching shifts in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War" (Kellner 2005, x). The document, entitled "The National Security Strategy of the United States", reified the long-desired changes to foreign policy held by senior Bush Administration officials who would now be able to pursue a unilateral approach to military intervention under the cover of the 'war on terror'. According to Kellner, the document "renounced the global security, multilateralism, and rule by international law that had informed US thinking since World War II" (2005, xi). A "strike first, ask questions later" approach was introduced that gave the US the power to declare as an enemy any regime that was unfriendly or inconvenient to American hegemony (Kellner 2005, xi). According to Kellner, "anticipatory self-defence" was introduced as a legitimate reason to launch full-scale military intervention into sovereign states that might only be accused of potential, rather than actual, belligerence (Kellner 2005, xiii). This blatantly imperialistic and aggressive mode of foreign policy was denounced by critics across the globe as dangerous and destabilising; it represented movement away from the careful definition of casus belli that underpins much of international law and prevents the spread of unwarranted conflict. The degeneration of these norms, Kellner argues, was evident before US forces invaded Iraq, with "Israel, Pakistan, Russia, China and lesser powers" all indicating a shift in their own approaches to foreign policy, citing the "Bush doctrine and war against terrorism to legitimate attacks on domestic and external foes" (2005, xi).

Of course, the Bush administration did not outwardly base its invasion of Iraq on expansionist rhetoric. In the aftermath of 9/11 the campaign to invade revolved mainly

around national security and the fight against terrorism, however disingenuous such concerns might have been when focused on Iraq. The advocates for invasion in the Bush administration infamously cited the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq as justification for war. The US demanded that UN weapons inspectors be allowed to visit the country, though leading figures like Richard Perle indicated that there was little Hussein could offer in terms of cooperation that would dissuade the Bush administration from the necessity of war (cited in Kellner 2005, xi). Colin Powell made his much-quoted speech on "weapons of mass destruction" to the UN in February 2003, clearly indicating to a global audience that war in Iraq was a certainty. However, the arguments put forward during this speech failed to convince even countries that typically sided with US interests; the eventual "coalition of the willing" was largely comprised of British and American forces (Kellner 2005, xiii). As the war edged closer demonstrations were held in major global cities including Rome, London, Paris, Madrid and Berlin. Despite this fervent opposition, the Bush administration went ahead with 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' and implemented sustained efforts to mobilise public approval for war. These efforts extended beyond publicising concerns for the future of the US as a hegemonic power or the prevention of terror attacks matching the devastation of 11 September 2001. The invasion of Iraq was framed as a righteous crusade to stamp out an existential threat to human life, launched by the world power charged with the protection of humanity. Despite strong and steadfast global resistance to this framing—the Iraq War being one of the most unpopular conflicts launched by a Western power in the last 50 years—the Bush administration and its British allies managed to seed just enough doubt and fear to secure the launch of the incursion.

The invocation of the Holocaust in cultural memory was vital to this project, particularly in the creation of a monster who could rival Adolf Hitler in public imagination. Andrew Hoskins, in *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq,* traces the ways in which

memory discourse surrounding war has been affected by the increasing availability—from television to internet—of media that can transmit the violence directly into households across the globe. Hoskins provides a detailed analysis of the ways in which Iraq's dictator became eponymous with Western conceptualisations of terrorism and evil in the immediate post-9/11 period, asserting that Hussein's "worldwide notoriety is probably the most disproportionate of any leader in modern history" (2004, 106). As Hoskins notes, Hussein had cast "a large and enduring shadow" over "three successive US presidents" (2004, 106); his presence on the world stage had been largely due to his "brutality", his "invasion of Iran in 1980 and subsequent eight-year war" and his "use of poison gas against the Kurds in Halabja in 1988" all gaining him a reputation as a feared and despised despot (Hoskins 2004, 106). However, with the notable exception of the Gulf War—following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990—the West did little to intervene until 2003 (Hoskins 2004, 106). As Hoskins argues, the intense media coverage of Saddam Hussein eventually produced a "globally-iconised visual image" of a monstrous dictator whose continued existence represented a threat to the future of mankind, making the invasion of Iraq not merely necessary but a moral imperative urgently required to stave off the inevitable murder of millions (2004, 107).

Fountain and the Theatre of War

For Ben Fountain in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk,* the task of mounting a critique of American imperialism and the rhetoric surrounding the Iraq War necessitates crafting a story that accesses the inner-most workings of this system and reveals the falsehoods on which it trades. Born in North Carolina in 1958 and a winner of the PEN/ Hemmingway Award, Fountain has amassed considerable critical acclaim for his writing; *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* was nominated for the National Book Award and won the National Book Critics Circle Award, among others. Though published in 2012, the novel is set at a vague point not long into the incursion, still under the command of the Bush administration. In this

text, Fountain does not guess at how characters from spaces like Afghanistan and Iraq might respond to the ways in which transnational memory discourses have been employed to promote jingoism in the post-9/11 context. Instead, Fountain's text highlights the manifestation of this process as un-critical patriotism in American culture, featuring a squad of young American soldiers, ostensibly insiders, just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq where they encountered enemy fire in an ambush caught on camera and broadcast across the United States. Home on a brief leave, the squad is sent on a 'Victory Tour', visiting cities across the country to encourage continued support of the war effort. From the outset, title character Billy Lynn and his cohorts in Bravo squad are aware of their status as props as they are driven to a Thanksgiving Day football event at the Dallas Cowboys' stadium.

The narrative, described by Brian Williams as a "satire of the American home front", unfolds over the course of an afternoon, creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia as the soldiers are trapped and forced to participate in a farcical display that promotes the blind nationalism underpinning the war (2017, 524). Fountain begins his surreal deconstruction of this climate of acquiescence to dangerous rhetoric by making it clear that his protagonists are excluded from its embrace; they do not feel comforted by the acceptance of war that has greeted them at home. The first indication of this alienation comes as the young soldiers encounter the stadium for the first time. 19-year-old Billy, like the rest of his cohort, comes from a modest background removed from the opulent lifestyles led by the elites they meet during their stay. Having grown up in Stovall, a small Texas town, Billy expects to be awed by the stadium. However, he immediately notices that it is only "years and years of carefully posed TV shots" that "have imbued the place with intimations of mystery and romance", complete with "dollops of state and national pride" (Fountain 2012, 10). The building itself, in its "real-life shabbiness", is a "nasty comedown" (Fountain 2012, 10); it slumps and sags with mismatched roof tiles, betraying each of its forty years. The displays of patriotism—the

flags, the football, the merchandise, the lauding of war and singing of anthems—contained within its walls create the impression of something altogether more grand for the benefit of the civilian attendee and casual TV viewer. Billy's time in Iraq witnessing the end result of this patriotism leaves him unimpressed by these illusions and unable to look beyond the decay revealed by the ugly business of war to the veneer of civility and pride that distracts and comforts his fellow citizens unencumbered by the realities of conflict. Ultimately, the stadium, and Billy's ability to see through its media-created image, comes to represent within the narrative a microcosm of America at war—a country that draws its power from the ability to perform and project a flamboyant nationalism at the expense of those soldiers who must enforce its dominance abroad.

Beyond the temporary visibility afforded by the Victory Tour, Billy and his squad members are in negotiations to have themselves immortalised on film as part of the effort to propagate support for the war. The boys travel to the stadium in a limousine, listening to the promises of a film executive, Albert. Fountain's narrator informs the reader that while the "war might be up to its ass in moral ambiguity", this is irrelevant to the potential success of a feature film since "Bravo's triumph busts through all that" (Fountain 2012, 6). Their story, initially picked up by Fox News cameras, has been sold as one of "rescue", referring to the role it has played in buoying public morale (Fountain 2012, 6). Albert has explained to the soldiers that "people respond deeply to such stories" because they feel "at least a little bit doomed basically all the time" (Fountain 2012, 6). Within a climate of general hopelessness and fear—presumably created by the sense of instability emerging out of 9/11 and the rhetoric portending the horrors of the Holocaust—relief is found in the image of "US cavalry charging out of yonder blue" and providing a cathartic demonstration of agency for the otherwise listless masses (Fountain 2012, 6).

The elites present at the stadium understand the power of this type of media and its role in promoting the war in Iraq. Albert, desperate to obtain funding for the project, turns to Norm, owner of the Dallas Cowboys. Norm is positioned within the narrative as a representative of corporate America, an individual who understands his wealth and success as bound up with his patriotism; the image of the American flag is ubiquitous within his stadium, covering every available piece of merchandise and encouraging patrons to spend money as a show of loyalty not only to the team but to America itself. As such, Norm is willing to provide financial backing for a film that will allow ordinary citizens to perform their participation in the war effort from the safety of a theatre. Norm believes that the film "will go a long way toward reinvigorating our commitment to the war" (Fountain 2012, 274). He asserts that "people are discouraged" as the price of war mounts, with the public forgetting "why we went there in the first place" and that "some things are actually worth fighting for" (Fountain 2012, 274). Significantly, Norm does not expand on this last point; he does not name the causes worth fighting for nor the reasons for the invasion. The specific factors justifying the invasion of Iraq remain vague, reflecting Norm's understanding of the war as an exercise in re-asserting American dominance in the post-9/11 era.

As we will see, the acceptance of such motivations is presented as standard within Fountain's narrative as he depicts a society that uses war to affirm national identity—a form of war that is primarily about advancing the agenda of the hegemonic aggressor— and commits to presenting and then problematizing its various modes of self-justification. Of course, the use of war as a vehicle for playing out a performance of national ideals is not a phenomenon unique to the post-9/11 period. In the second of his famous essays on the Gulf War of the early 1990s, "The Gulf War: is it really taking place?", Jean Baudrillard asserts that the conflict is not a confrontation between ideological adversaries but rather America fighting "an enemy in their own image" (Baudrillard 2009, 37). The overarching argument of

Baudrillard's Gulf War essays hinges on the notion that war has changed in the decades since World War II and has entered into "a definitive crisis" (Baudrillard 2009, 23). In the Cold War years, Baudrillard argues, "deterrence" kept "two blocs" from outright war "on the basis of a virtual excess of the means of destruction" (2009, 23). Instead, we are left to contend with one-sided incursions led by Western hegemonic powers as they flex their might against relatively defenceless adversaries, such as in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Baudrillard contends that the US in particular "can only imagine and combat an enemy" in its "own image" (2009, 37). He argues that America "cannot imagine the Other, nor therefore personally make war upon it" (2009, 37); the existence of a complex, rational, fully-realised Other not dependent on American power or adopting its system of governance or cultural norms is anathema to America's understanding of itself as an ideal nation. The Gulf War and subsequent post-9/11 conflicts are better understood as wars upon the "alterity of the Other" (Baudrillard 2009, 37). These wars are launched, in other words, not out of righteousness or altruism but out of vanity and a need to demand total, global acquiescence to a hegemonic agenda. The actual existence of the Other—as a populace or ideology—is largely immaterial; the only relevant concern is the Other's perceived opposition to the dominant power. Baudrillard argues that war waged by Western nations, America in particular, emerges now out of an inability to accept alterity (2009, 37). Such powers, reading difference or the most meagre non-compliance as dissent, resolve to "reduce that alterity, to convert it or failing that to annihilate it if it proves irreducible" (Baudrillard 2009, 37). Thus Baudrillard reaches the conclusion that the West is "in conflict with itself, by means of an interposed mercenary" (2009, 38). The wars that make up this conflict amount to Western hegemony responding to the "challenge", whether material or merely that of difference, from "the rest of the world" (Baudrillard 2009, 38). The reality, of course, is that these non-wars against what Baudrillard terms a "fake enemy" involve real altercations in which civilians are murdered in their

thousands, civilians that are rendered irrelevant in the quest of a hegemonic power to expand its influence; such populations are scarcely a factor in the decision to engage in combat (Baudrillard 2009, 38).

Ultimately, as Baudrillard concludes in “The Gulf War did not take place”, we “will never know what an Iraqi taking part with a chance of winning would have been like” nor what it would have meant for an American to take “part with a chance of being beaten” (2009, 61). Instead, a mismatched conflict took place in which there could only be one victor, an inequality repeated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The purpose of invasion in such situations is not, then, to prove the ability to defeat one’s enemy or effect regime change—those outcomes are all but guaranteed whether they enact positive change or destabilise a region—but to loudly beat the war drum and proclaim one’s righteousness and demonstrate might. As such the immortalisation on film of what amounts, for one side, to war games is to be expected. Fountain positions Norm as a conduit for this process as he understands that for these incursions to be effective, the American public must be able to witness through media the ease with which their military representatives triumph over a foe positioned for the sake of legitimacy as a worthy adversary—that there is, in fact, something “worth fighting for” (Fountain 2012, 274).

As Andrew Hoskins points out in *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War,* media of all types play a pivotal role in shaping public perception of these conflicts, allowing them to gain purchase in the public imagination as legitimate wars driven by genuine grievances (2010). This relationship between war and media has intensified in the aftermath of 9/11 to become an indispensable asset for those charged with mobilising public support for the conflicts of the ‘war on terror’. However, these processes have their roots in the development of news media that occurred during the 20th century with the advent of television and the eventual running of live feeds from warzones on nightly news reports

(Hoskins 2010, 1). Hoskins argues that "once news could be transferred electronically" and information pertaining to "war, conflict and catastrophe could traverse distances instantaneously", there existed the "potential for global awareness, for a global village" where "danger and suffering could be brought closer to us" (2010, 1). The advancements made in media technology were not designed, in other words, with malevolent purposes in mind; the technology that allows for greater transparency around conflict might well be considered as a positive development, forcing domestic audiences removed from conflict to engage with the realities of war as it appears on the televisions in their homes.

However, despite the potential for increased visibility of the suffering attendant to war, transparency and empathetic relation to what appears on screen remains elusive. Media chronicling war, especially news media, are seldom the free-flowing sources of raw information that they appear to be; instead, images and reports pouring out of warzones come to us through mediators whose various editorial agendas are brought to bear on the information we receive. Hoskins argues that due to "changes in the communication of media, citizen media and to militaries themselves", media and war have become intertwined to the extent that "the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it" (2010, 4). Hoskins describes this emergent form of conflict, whose fortunes are so bound up with media representation, as "mediatised" warfare—mediatisation being defined by Stig Hjarvarad as a "process whereby social and cultural institutions are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence" (cited in Hoskins 2010, 5). When applied to war, mediatisation describes a newfound reality wherein "the planning, waging and consequences of warfare do not reside outside of the media" (Hoskins 2010, 5). News media are not merely an external factor for consideration when waging war in the 21st century; instead, media is a vital consideration from the earliest planning-stages as they largely determine how the campaign will be received among the public. According to

Hoskins, "perceptions are vital to war", the "perceptions of a public who can offer support for a war" or alternatively deny it support and condemn the government championing its urgency (2010, 5). However, this is not to suggest that the public, as a result of this increased exposure to war, can necessarily be considered informed as to its realities. As Hoskins succinctly argues, "media bring war closer in some ways, but keep it distant in others" (2010, 7). Media technologies allowing for live feeds and immediate reportage on events—perhaps because of that emphasis on transparency which is paradoxically employed to distract from their ultimate opacity—help to "create a distance from what has conventionally been considered the stuff of warfare" (Hoskins 2010, 7).

For Hoskins, the "stuff of warfare" refers to "human bodies being injured, land being secured", the material realities of war that, in the case of post-9/11 conflicts, do not fit with the image of a righteous war waged for the supposed liberation of the Iraqi citizenry (2010, 7). The phenomenon of embedded journalism has been fundamental to the creation of a media landscape that is at once curated and pretending to transparency. The practice of embedding reporters with combat units has been central to the business of war since World War I, helping to create the distance described by Hoskins. As described in the introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 2, roughly 600 reporters were given such access to the 2003 war in Iraq, with the vast majority of these journalists coming from Britain, the US and Australia. As Judith Butler describes in *Frames of War,* the reality of embedded reporting is far from the free-range experience it appears to be from the perspective of the audience (2009, 64). These reporters function, in many cases willingly, as participants in the larger military-run operation; where the support of journalists was not readily or gladly given, it was often forced through strict regulation on reporting and continued exposure to the soldiers involved (Butler 2009, 64). As Butler notes, reporters were denied the objectivity that ideally accompanies their role and instead "travelled only in certain transports, looked at only certain

scenes, relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action", implicitly shoring-up the government-sanctioned view of the war (2009, 64). Constant exposure to the men and women of the army as companions in combat, when coupled with a lack of attention to civilian deaths, eventually resulted in biased reporting that could function as propaganda for a public convinced of the impartiality of the media.

The insidious partnership of war and news media is represented in Fountain's text: the footage of Bravo squad optioned as the basis for the film was captured and distributed by a journalist embedded with the unit. Fountain's novel also explores the ways in which the success of embedding and other media coverage in promoting the image of a heroic military is bolstered by a focus on weaponry. Fountain reflects the ways in which the invasion of Iraq was disjunctively framed as simultaneously an attack on an existential threat—embodied by Saddam Hussein and his supposed stockpile of WMDs—and a showcase for a mighty and unbeatable American military. In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk,* as in the world it depicts, the contradiction inherent to this framing is masked via an emphasis on technology in war reporting—an emphasis that encourages a morbid fascination among the general public regarding means of murder and carnage, to the neglect of all other concerns. Mike Gasher notes a "technocratic theme" in coverage of the Iraq War, focusing on weapons and their increased capability for destruction over the human cost of such advancements (2005, 210). According to Gasher, the emphasis on military tactics and equipment during the invasion and subsequent occupation not only succeeded in distracting attention from civilian casualties but also in implicitly advancing the Orientalist reading of Iraq prevalent in Western news coverage during this period (2005, 209). American weaponry, in standard opaque language, was described in terms of "clean, accurate and efficient armaments" that could carry out surgical strikes against carefully chosen and presumably deserving targets—the weapons of a virtuous world power acting reluctantly against evil (2005, 209). Iraqi weapons were, in

contrast, described by the singularly ominous term “weapons of mass destruction”, conjuring associations with brutality, imprecision and contempt for life that could then be extrapolated to account for the attitudes of Iraqis more generally (Gasher 2005, 209).

Fountain demonstrates the ways in which this framing is absorbed into public discourse surrounding the Iraq War as he describes Billy’s encounter with the Dallas Cowboys, the American football team featured at the stadium during their visit. The team is positioned as the civilian equivalent to Bravo squad, figures admired for the ways in which they embody a masculine ideal that plays into notions of a powerful and dominant national identity. They seek connection with the soldiers on the subject of weaponry, seemingly understanding the use of equipment as the only significant difference between their sport-sanctioned aggression and the violence committed by a soldier in the context of war. This is a parallel not made solely by the players themselves, but by the media and government/ military establishment who see fit to celebrate the actions of the soldiers by placing them within the same physical space as sports stars where they can be rendered benign and lauded with the same vigour, without acknowledgement of their function as agents of war. The players enquire as to what Billy carries while on duty and he responds, telling them about the M4 semiautomatic assault rifle and M240 fully automatic that “lays down a hundred and fifty rounds per minute” (Fountain 2012, 176). The language devolves into jargon, mimicking the ways in which such discussions elide the reality that the “rounds” are hitting real human targets. Though Fountain does not make his critique of the language here explicit, the ease with which the conversation revolves around tools of war is deliberately disquieting in its detachment from the implied loss of human life.

The conversation does eventually shift to an acknowledgement of the human targets involved, though this does not signal the beginning of a more compassionate line of questioning; the victims remain an abstraction, only contemplated to contextualise the power

of the weapons used against them. Octavian, a football player and Billy's chief questioner, bluntly asks what happens "when you pop somebody" with an M4 (Fountain 2012, 177). We are told that Billy laughs at the question though this is not a response to humour: Billy's laugh is instead a nervous reaction to a direct reference to the death he has witnessed. Fountain's narrator describes Billy as slipping into a state of numbness, feeling a very particular kind of "nothing" (Fountain 2012, 177) or detachment as he adopts the rhetorical posture of the hardened soldier to deal with the questions that hit him "where he bleeds" (Fountain 2012, 176). Speaking about the M240 rifle, Billy dispassionately tells his audience that it "fucking takes them apart" (Fountain 2012, 177). The severity of Billy's words does not seem to register with the players; they remain dazzled by the prospect of the machinery and so offer to "help" (Fountain 2012, 187). They tell Billy that they would like to do something "extreme" like "cap some Muslim freaks" or "bust some raghead ass" (Fountain 2012, 187). When Billy suggests that they might join the army, the players regard such a suggestion as ridiculous, insisting that they already have jobs but were merely offering their services as volunteers. Fountain's civilian characters' use of extreme epithets to describe Muslims and the deluded fantasies expressed by the football players demonstrate the ways in which military force has been rendered banal within the American culture described in the novel, to the extent that the violent entertainment provided by football can, in public imagination, be un-problematically parlayed into lethal engagement with an indistinct enemy. Fountain suggests here that, for a substantial portion of the public, war and violent sports are interchangeable pursuits motivated by the same interest in domination over one's enemy with negligible attention paid to the disparity in the types of casualties amassed. The ease with which such violence is reconciled also arguably reflects an American cultural context that takes armaments as a constitutional right.

In illustrating the absurdity of the attitudes on display here and offering a counter-perspective, Fountain casts in Bravo Squad a group of young men for whom the opulence of the 'American dream' has always been a far-fetched illusion, a notion of progress and social mobility that they could fight a war to ostensibly protect but from which they will always be excluded. They are therefore, by extension, excluded in many ways from the enticements of war; having experienced its violence and cynicism, they return home to find themselves paraded around as heroes but still outsiders in a system whose institutions depend for survival upon their protection of American hegemonic power. Billy's own signing-up was court-mandated as a result of an act of petty vandalism—they "got his carcass for absolutely free" (Fountain 2012, 72). Others he encounters during the Victory Tour are considering joining up because, like Hector, a waiter at the stadium, they "gotta have insurance" for kids or because they "have debts" and the "entitlement bonus of $6000" is appealing (Fountain 2012, 72). The reality of this de facto conscription as a major recruitment tool is unacknowledged by the members of the public that Bravo squad encounter at the stadium. Instead, their service is unquestioningly interpreted as being born from a sense of duty and nationalistic pride, a sentiment that their tour in Iraq has, it seems, rendered them incapable of feeling with the same fervour as their elite counterparts.

This divide manifests most clearly as Billy and his cohort spend a significant portion of their time at the stadium in the owner's box, encountering the wealthiest citizens present. As the soldiers enter the "club" where they are served lunch, the patrons rise and deliver a "stately round of applause", but the adulation and the disparity in wealth makes Billy feel uneasy (Fountain 2012, 51). The narrator informs us that Billy feels "his stride going wonky" as "several of the nearby millionaires stepped over to shake hands" (Fountain 2012, 51). Billy understands the role he is meant to fulfil and emulates the stance of his superior officer, Sergeant Dime, standing tall – "head tipped six degrees as if dignity was a shot glass you

balanced on your chin" – and graciously accepting praise (Fountain 2012, 52). This silent sufferance of adulation characterises the ways in which Fountain positions his protagonist throughout the narrative in order to reveal the farcical celebration of war in American culture. Billy does not express his confusion or distaste at the praise through an outburst; nor is Fountain's disapproval conveyed through the contrast between an overzealous citizenry and a group of disillusioned, uncomfortable soldiers.

Instead, Fountain frames the general public as existing within an echo chamber which the realities of war cannot penetrate. The singular, resounding noise reverberating around this space, drowning out cries of despair from Iraqi civilians and American soldiers alike, is the jeremiad. The jeremiad, as explained in earlier chapters, is defined as a mournful lament with religious connotations; according to Bond, it is a rhetorical genre that played a vital role in the aftermath of 9/11 in transforming the attacks from a shocking breach of national security into a new cultural touchstone that could be invoked to strengthen the position of the US as a superpower (2015, 55). When wielded by a US president, with the symbolic significance such a figure commands, the jeremiad had the power to reshape a moment of horror and instability into an instance of divine reckoning (Bond 2015, 58). President Bush, in his first address after the attacks, insisted that America had been "blessed with a new responsibility to history" and would now be faced with the immense task of leading the world in "a monumental struggle of good versus evil", thus aiding in the alignment of 9/11 with the Holocaust and the moral necessity of WWII in cultural memory (cited in Bond 2015, 58-59). The jeremiad helped the attacks to enter national consciousness not as a blow to the dominance of a hegemonic power, but as a call to arms for the virtuous citizens of a nation charged with the betterment of the human race, smoothing out the inconsistencies that might have prevented the proponents of the 'war on terror' from singling out Iraq as a target for its ire.

Fountain represents the acceptance and ratification of the jeremiad in public discourse through those characters whose statements of support for the invasion of Iraq mimic the righteous urgency of the genre while glossing over the lack of a credible threat or casus belli. Some refer to vague, incomprehensible goals like "gaining freedoms to enhance our freedoms" while others simply cite the notion that "they want to kill us" with no explanation as to who "they" might include (Fountain 2012, 197). Citizens approach Billy and, without introduction, begin speaking in "certainties, imperatives, absolutes" (Fountain 2012, 197), thanking him for the "job" he and others are doing in the vague "over there" so that America is secure from a future spent "praying to Allah and wearing towels on our heads" (Fountain 2012, 183). Of course, it is important to note here Fountain's decision to portray only the most credulous examples of the American citizenry; he deliberately ignores those civilians who protested the invasion before its launch and the fact that a majority of Americans came to regard the war as a mistake (Jones 2007). Fountain instead foregrounds a host of characters who represent the most virulent supporters of the war; they function within the narrative as one-dimensional caricatures—their ridiculousness itself a critique of the invasion—and a lesson in the dangers of buying uncritically into wartime rhetoric and propaganda. The depiction of only the most adamant supporters also emphasises Billy Lynn's alienation; it is these individuals whose voices he hears above the fray, standing out to him as the unthinking arbiters of his own misery.

Perhaps the most precise representation of the jeremiad in the novel comes in the form of a declaration made by Norm, taking on the mantel of leader in the absence of a government figure. Norm asserts that the "war on terror may be as pure a fight between good and evil as we're likely to see in our lifetime" (Fountain 2012, 130); he suggests that it might be a "challenge put forth by God as a test" of America's "mettle", a trial to ascertain whether the US is "worthy" of its "freedoms" (Fountain 2012, 130). In line with the genre of the

jeremiad, the language employed here is vague and imprecise, avoiding any explanation of how American freedom is threatened by the existence of Saddam Hussein as one "of history's most ruthless and belligerent tyrants", noting the dictator's history of violence against the Iraqi people (Fountain 2012, 131). The specific justification for American interference remains unclear; Norm merely parrots the language of exceptionalism to claim that this type of "mission" is what America is "*for",* that its very purpose, as the "greatest nation on earth", is to "promote freedom and democracy and give the peoples of the world the chance to determine their own fate" (Fountain 2012, 131, emphasis in original).

Fountain does not engage directly with the arrogance or insincerity of this statement. Billy's response to Norm's speech is markedly muted as he merely wonders quietly whether "Norm will run for office someday", evidently recognising the ways in which Norm's statements mimic those of the politicians supporting the war (Fountain 2012, 131). Significantly, Fountain demonstrates the potency of the jeremiad as a means of communication through the efficacy of Norm's speech; far from recognising Norm's thinly-veiled war-mongering, the crowd are caught up in the urgency of his words and taken in by the appeal to exceptionalism. Fountain's narrator, drawing on Billy's apparent disgust, remarks that they allow the "fakeness to roll right off them", perhaps understanding that there is something amiss in Norm's rhetoric but finding the pretence comforting rather than insulting or frightening (Fountain 2012, 131). Billy surmises that they have "exceptionally high thresholds for sham, puff, spin" and "outright lies", a form of "advertising" with which Billy had little problem until "he'd done time in a combat zone" (Fountain 2012, 131).

This disillusionment manifests in Fountain's narrative as an ability in 19-year-old Billy Lynn to see through the empty speechifying of his elders to witness the cynical war-baiting underlying their words. In representing this clarity of perspective on the page, Fountain makes particularly effective use of the surreal form of narration that he employs

throughout the novel. Fountain adopts free indirect discourse as the primary mode of delivery, slipping in and out of Billy's perspective in an otherwise third-person narrative, giving us access to Billy's sense of displacement and apparent immunity to the appeal of the jeremiad. In a number of instances, Fountain relinquishes his hold on the narrative form and ceases attempts to describe Billy's state of mind in any coherent manner. Instead, he opts to mimic the disjointed thought process of a young soldier viewing with derision the contradictions he witnesses in his surroundings. During these narrative breaks words swirl around the page, capturing the moment at which Billy disengages from a particular conversation and now catches only those buzzwords that have come to mark every conversation on the Victory Tour. Terms like "evil", "terRist", "freedom", "nina leven" and "God" appear at random points on the page (Fountain 2012, 2); these words are spelled phonetically to reflect the regional accents of the speakers and the fact that their utterances come to us unfiltered, passing unprocessed through the disinterested consciousness of their intended target.

This technique allows Fountain to undermine the patriotic displays and performances on show at the stadium. This space, as a microcosm for American culture at war, is revealed as teeming with uncritical patrons, each more clownish than the last and parroting the same rhetoric to someone they have identified as a representative of war. Perhaps the most effective example of this in Fountain's narrative is Billy's response to the singing of the national anthem. Drawing on Billy's frustrated internal monologue as he witnesses what is presumably an earnest rendition, Fountain's narrator refers to the performance as a "ritual torturing of a difficult song" (Fountain 2012, 203). As the woman's singing devolves for Billy into a parodic performance, Fountain's narration mimics the way in which she drags out vowels, using capitalisation to represent the parts where she alternates between a near-whisper and a bellow (Fountain 2012, 204). Fountain brings the reader into the scene,

allowing us to experience the performance from Billy's perspective as the phonetic representations of the singer's belting punctuate insights into his consciousness. Unimpressed by the theatrics, Billy's thoughts wander to the ambush in Iraq and the friends he lost there, then finding their way to a woman he has met at the stadium. He translates the anthem into a "love song" for Faison, struggling to maintain his composure as the traumatic memories of war threaten to overwhelm him (Fountain 2012, 205). Fountain's narrator describes Billy as feeling as though his "skull might split at any moment" (Fountain 2012, 205). Despite the desperation and suffering described here, the anthem continues unabated; Billy "holds his salute" and remains "standing ramrod straight" so that no one watching in the audience or at home is aware of his internal turmoil (Fountain 2012, 205). Frustratingly for the reader, the glimpses into Billy's mind-set are intercut relentlessly with snippets of the anthem, obnoxiously intervening and distracting attention from his suffering. Fountain's textual construction thus demonstrates the ways in which the performative nationalism and patriotism on display at the stadium is not merely a frivolous distraction but a harmful and often wilful attempt to gloss over or hide from view the trauma engendered by its fulfilment in conflicts abroad.

Reaching the apex of his criticism for the attitudes encountered at the stadium, Fountain describes the response to the national anthem, and the ills it helps mask, in terms of inebriation. Fountain's narrator bluntly observes that "never do Americans sound so much like a bunch of drunks as when celebrating the end of their national anthem" (Fountain 2012, 207); intoxicated by the anthem and the atmosphere inside the stadium, the other patrons are described as though they are brainwashed, taken in by the display and responding accordingly. A dozen women "converge on Billy", demanding his attention in a manner that makes it seem as though they might "tear him limb from limb" (Fountain 2012, 207). This is not something new for Billy; he is used to unsolicited touching, acknowledging that "part of

being a soldier is accepting that your body does not belong to you" (Fountain 2012, 206). This encounter seems to represent the crux of Fountain's argument, as an unthinking, nationalistic fervour implicitly allows for the transposition of the soldier's body into public property. Fountain's narrator sees the women through Billy's gaze, describing the way "their eyes are cranking those crazy lights", indicating that they have slipped into the desired state where "there is nothing they wouldn't do for America", including "torture, nukes, worldwide collateral damage" (Fountain 2012, 207). When asked if he feels "so proud" upon hearing the anthem, Billy retreats into acerbic internal monologue and the memory of his dead squad-mates (Fountain 2012, 207); he wonders if he is even "talking the same language" as his fellow citizens (Fountain 2012, 207). With this, Fountain articulates a total disavowal of all that is taking place within the stadium, revealing as a cynical sham the careless nationalism that allows for the abuse of the soldier's body and the feckless, bloodthirsty decimation of countries that fall afoul of American hegemony.

Despite Billy's disdain for his fellow citizens and their celebratory attitude toward war, he balks at the notion that he might refuse to redeploy to Iraq. Kathryn, Billy's sister, puts him in touch with a "group down in Austin" who "help soldiers" that do not wish to return to war (Fountain 2012, 99). Through Kathryn, Fountain articulates the disparities in wealth and power that so often determine who launches wars and which groups must fight in them. Kathryn names powerful men from media and government—Bush, Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Rove, Cheney—alongside their respective reasons for deferred service (Fountain 2012, 98). For Kathryn, their absence from the overseas wars they promote is hypocrisy; she is adamant that "Billy Lynn's done his part" (Fountain 2012, 98). Billy will not entertain Kathryn's pleas, arguing astutely that the hypocrisy of powerful elites "just doesn't matter" and insisting that he will "be okay" (Fountain 2012, 98). Despite Billy's insightful commentary throughout the novel, Fountain offers a glimpse into his naivety during this trip

home. Once ensconced with his mother and sisters, Billy reverts somewhat to innocence and is unable to see the impact his death would have on his family, as Kathryn points out. In this way, Fountain highlights the ways in which the burden of mourning so often falls to women; with his father suffering ill-health, Billy leaves his mother and sisters to face a potential foreclosure on their family home while worrying about his fate in Iraq. However, Billy's loyalty to his squad ultimately supersedes any concern he might have for his own safety or the concerns of his family; though Billy is tempted by the offer of help to escape the military at points throughout the narrative, Kathryn's persistent phone calls are ignored and he eventually heads back to war, indicating his sense that he might not return as he thinks to himself "good-bye, good-bye, good-night, I love you all" (Fountain 2012, 307). As such, Fountain demonstrates the insidious ways in which duty and camaraderie are employed to entrap soldiers and sustain the war machine; despite Billy's indifference to nationalism and his awareness that his death will mean little to those in power, he is forced to continue to perform the role of the noble soldier.

Post-9/11 Fiction and the Depiction of Perpetrator Trauma

Further to Fountain's challenge to the media-led maelstrom informing and shaping national attitudes toward the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he also provides insight into the specific ways in which American soldiers suffer as a result of their tours abroad. This focus, in both Fountain and Klay's narratives, serves not simply as a secondary means of revealing American and allied attitudes as dangerously jingoistic, but shines light on the suffering of those who, despite their centrality to war narratives, often go unheard. For Phil Klay in *Redeployment* (2014), highlighting the plight of the traumatised soldier is central to the project of depicting the ills engendered by American foreign policy in the post-9/11 era. This award-winning collection of short stories, all delivered through first-person narration, chronicles the experiences of US Marines from a range of backgrounds, depicting their roles

in the armed forces and their relationship with their nation of origin following their deployment. Klay, a former Marine born in New York in 1983, gives considerable attention in his collection to the cynicism of the Iraq War; in "Money as a Weapons System" his depiction of a media-obsessed bureaucracy dominating efforts to build infrastructure in Iraq offers a piercing critique of the public face of the war as an altruistic endeavour. However, Klay's collection of short stories is most notable for the ways in which it captures the traumatic impact of this cynicism upon the soldiers made to enforce it. In this, Klay contributes to a long tradition of war fiction which remains preoccupied with the experience of the soldier, both in the midst of conflict and on returning home.

Earlier chapters in this thesis have detailed the ways in which the depiction of trauma takes on a particularly fraught role in fiction of the post-9/11 era. For Hosseini and Aslam, the representation of trauma is a means of 'writing-back'—a political act designed to force readers to recognise the humanity and suffering of communities rendered marginal in discourse surrounding the 'war on terror'. This task is made more complex by the reality that Western conceptualisations of trauma offered largely ill-fitting definitions for experiences in non-Western conflict zones. In "Beyond Eurocentricism: Trauma theory in the global age", Stef Craps argues that trauma theory as a field of inquiry must acknowledge its roots in specifically Western critical traditions and make a concerted effort to diversify its methodologies if it is to avoid Eurocentric and exclusionary approaches in the future (2014). Among the most commonly adopted definitions of Western-formulated trauma in cultural and literary theory is Cathy Caruth's Freudian understanding of trauma as an experience that "cannot be assimilated as it occurs" (Caruth 1996, 5). Within this conceptualisation, the inability to "assimilate" the traumatic experience is generally due to its impact as a confrontation with one's mortality or a psychic shock of similar magnitude impossible for the

individual to reconcile (Caruth 1996, 5).[1] According to Craps, however, clinging to such definitions of trauma as an individually-focused phenomenon usually stemming from a "single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" is unhelpful when considering trauma common to conflict zones (2014, 50). Such narrow definitions ignore the complexities of the suffering experienced in spaces like Afghanistan, where trauma is often the result of colonial violence. Trauma in such cases may have taken root over decades, meaning that recovery—understood in Western psychology as a return to a perceived normality, an integration of the trauma into an individual's narrative memory— is an inadequate concept where the cause of the trauma is unacknowledged and has ongoing effects (Craps 2014, 53-54).

Rendering such trauma accessible for a Western reading audience involved for Hosseini and Aslam considerable creativity with narrative form and technique. For Hosseini, the trauma of Afghanistan's recent history was most effectively, if problematically, translated as allegory into the rape of a main character; for Aslam, the ghosts of Afghanistan and Pakistan's past were ever-present in his narratives, never permitting the peace necessary for forgetting. Alongside such efforts to memorialise the forgotten histories of marginalised communities in the post-9/11 context, the task of highlighting the trauma of American soldiers, agents of empire, seems perhaps misguided. In *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives,* Alan Gibbs confirms that the foregrounding of what he calls perpetrator trauma has indeed been a controversial prospect among trauma theorists (2014). Gibbs points to leading theorists such as Dominick LaCapra, who has insisted that the study of trauma should "maintain empathy with the victim and repulsion toward the perpetrator" (cited in Gibbs 2014, 167). For researchers working to highlight the suffering of trauma survivors, to confer "victim status onto members of the American armed forces" ostensibly responsible for that

[1] Caruth's reading of trauma, though highly influential in literary and cultural trauma theory, has been heavily critiqued by a number of leading scholars (Leys 2000; Gibbs 2014). See pp. 32-38.

same trauma seems to require an ethically dubious form of "doublethink" (Gibbs 2014, 161). Soldiers themselves are not immune to the confusion engendered by this doublethink: they are caught between a need to ease "guilt" by acknowledging an authoritarian military power structure to which they are subject, and their allegiance to a "profoundly masculine discourse of war narrative that demands agency" and their full-throated support (Gibbs 2014, 161). To cast themselves entirely as unwilling pawns would be tantamount to desertion, an abdication of their public role as noble warriors fighting for a cause in which they believe without reservation.

Perhaps in part as a result of this forced loyalty, "the traumatic symptoms suffered by those who are not (wholly) in a position conventionally recognised as that of the victim" have garnered only reluctant acknowledgement among trauma theorists (Gibbs 2014, 165). Gibbs notes that this reluctance, while ethically-driven and understandable given the suffering precipitated by Western armies globally, is "surprising" when one considers the ways in which the emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosis depended, according to Allan Young (*The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)*, upon "a political struggle waged by psychiatric workers and activists on behalf of the large number of Vietnam War veterans" suffering the "effects" of "war-related trauma" (cited in Gibbs 2014, 166). Gibbs explains the reluctance in the "cultural trauma studies" of LaCapra and Caruth to deal with perpetrator trauma as resulting from its roots in Freudian theory and most importantly in Holocaust Studies, accounting for an inclination to focus on the perspective of the victim (2014, 19). As such, though PTSD "depended as a concept upon the lobbying of perpetrator trauma sufferers, their particular condition has been marginalised since the acceptance of PTSD as the principal trauma paradigm" (Gibbs 2014, 166).

With the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* in 1980, PTSD entered common parlance, with the result that a standard diagnosis

was now available for the symptoms that had haunted veterans for generations—conditions previously named as shell-shock, battle fatigue or combat stress reaction. However, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, PTSD is regarded by theorists like Young as less a unified syndrome than what Gibbs calls a "socio-political category" championed by veterans' groups and feminist activists (2014, 4). Despite the involvement of such groups, according to Jenny Edkins in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, the introduction of trauma as a medically recognised condition led to a reduction in the "political controversies surrounding the Vietnam war to questions of stress-related illness, treatment and maybe compensation" (2003, 48). Edkins explains this process, drawing on Michel Foucault's work in *Madness and Civilization* to trace the ways in which the diagnosis of PTSD paradoxically functions to de-problematise the pursuit of war by governments at the expense of their citizens. Foucault, as Edkins explains, described how the "mad of the seventeenth century replaced the lepers of the previous century in asylums" (2003, 52). The role of those occupying the asylums was "to produce [society's] boundaries" and to "assure the rest of the world that it was sane" since, by providing evidence of its opposite, they "defined what sanity was" (Edkins 2003, 52). In the same way, sufferers of war-induced PTSD have their images and personal stories "manipulated to reassure power, to put it back in its place after violence" (Edkins 2003, 52). According to Edkins, the "violence of wars and revolutions is necessary to produce the state" in the sense that these conflicts allow for an assertion of national identity and a rendering of the state as an entity for which it is worth killing and dying (2003, 52). However, because the "state claims to be a banding together of individuals in a peaceable fashion for the greater well-being of all", this foundational violence must he "hidden" or normalised as a benign or necessary aspect of governing (Edkins 2003, 52). As Edkins argues, "in order for this charade to work", the sufferings of "survivors have to be hidden, ignored or medicalised" (2003, 52).

It is this manipulation of trauma that Klay targets most forcefully in his critique of the Iraq War. By highlighting the traumatic experiences of the soldier, Klay seeks to reclaim these narratives from the state and interrogate the notion of sacrifice as it pertains to those who participated in the war in Iraq; in doing so, he destabilises the notion of a cohesive national dedication to the 'war on terror', revealing it instead as a crusade that visited suffering upon significant portions of the domestic population. Klay accesses a reality in which, according to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately 22 veterans committed suicide every day between 1999 and 2010—an estimate considered conservative (Kemp 2013). This reality is reflected in "Redeployment", the title story of Klay's collection, where trauma manifests as alienation in protagonist Sergeant Price, in line with Gibbs' conceptualisation of perpetrator trauma. The reading of Sergeant Price as suffering specifically from perpetrator trauma, rather than a vague manifestation of PTSD, is important, as Klay is careful not to present his protagonists as soldiers who merely wandered into a warzone and encountered violence by chance. With civilian deaths in Iraq vastly outstripping those of occupying forces, Klay's protagonists necessarily inhabit the role of the perpetrator even as they contend with their own trauma.

As Price returns home from a tour of duty and struggles to re-adjust to life with his wife and dog, he displays symptoms closely resembling those Gibbs identifies as characterising perpetrator trauma. Though similar—in what Gibbs describes as its "gradual rather than sudden" onset—to the ongoing trauma of oppression described by Craps, the trauma described here is differentiated by its occurrence in those in the position of oppressor (2014, 169). Ultimately, according to Gibbs, it is "an insidious accretion of guilt coupled with disillusionment about the cause being fought for" that eventually prompts the creeping onset of perpetrator trauma (2014, 169). In Sergeant Price, Klay uses first-person narration to depict an individual whose return home is a fraught experience not due to any one violent

incident but rather the slow accumulation of troublesome episodes that now haunt him. He describes feeling detached from the violence itself, noting that "at the time you don't think about it" (Klay 2014, 1). The soldier in combat, according to Price, thinks only of "who's in that house, what's he armed with, how's he gonna kill your buddies" (Klay 2014, 1). With no room for careful contemplation of one's actions in battle, "the thinking comes later, when they give you the time" (Klay 2014, 1). The so-called time to "decompress"—time spent at a camp away from the battle zone before departing for home—is presumably set aside by officials so that soldiers might attempt to reconcile their experience at war with the ideals propagated by those promoting its continuance (Klay 2014, 1). Price attends "classes" on how not to "kill yourself" or "beat your wife", efforts to undo profound psychological unsettlement so as to delimit its capacity to undermine public support for the war (Klay 2014, 10).

However, for the sufferer of perpetrator trauma, beyond the prevention of these most extreme manifestations, the decompression period or attempts at rationalisation are unsuccessful. Instead, the relentless upheaval of the war results in an alienation conveyed, according to Gibbs, by "boredom and frustration" (2014, 175). In the case of Sergeant Price this manifests as a disconnection from the nation that sent him to war. On a shopping trip with his wife, Cheryl, this detachment becomes almost dangerous as Price silently deals with the confusion he feels while walking through city streets for the first time since his return from Iraq. He marvels at the "people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal" and resents that they "have no idea where Fallujah is" (Klay 2014, 12). Gibbs notes that for the sufferer of perpetrator trauma, "memory" is often something "consciously tormenting rather than suppressed into the unconscious" (2014, 170). Fuelled by guilt and a desire to confess or rationalise behaviours, traumatic memories are not locked away for the perpetrator (Gibbs 2014, 170). As Price walks down the street plagued by the weight of his role in Iraq,

the danger and violence he saw and committed, Klay's first-person narration is particularly useful in demonstrating the chasm that exists between the illusion of the US as a peaceful space and the violence that exists at its periphery, just out of sight. Price observes bitterly that his fellow citizens remain within the comforting mirage of the state, their sense of national identity perhaps buoyed by the post-9/11 wars but nevertheless unperturbed by the violent realities of them. Price describes the nerve-wracking experience of war in terms of a colour scale, with white representing the easy obliviousness of those who have never felt the terror of battle and red denoting the soldier's experience of encountering their own mortality. According to Price, the people on the streets walking carelessly by shop windows have "spent their whole lives at white" (Klay 2014, 12); the soldier, even returned from war, remains "orange, all the time" (Klay 2014, 13). No longer able to believe the illusion of security offered by the state, having witnessed and participated in its violent underbelly, the soldier's "brain chemistry changes" so that they "take in every piece of the environment, everything" (Klay 2014, 13).

This exhausting state of hyper-alertness sets Price apart from every other shopper on the street in Wilmington, to the extent that he cannot describe people he passes in any great detail. His focus, and so ours, is entirely trained on his struggle to remember that he is not in any immediate danger. Price's only connection, beyond the squad members also returned home, seems to be with his pet dog, Vicar. In his ailing health, with tumours developing just out of sight "on his legs" and under his fur, the dog offers a physical manifestation of Price's own trauma, needing to be put down by his owner to attain deliverance from his suffering (Klay 2014, 9). For Price, this deliverance is obtainable only through a possible return to Iraq, a space in which his new mind-set and understanding of the world is not placed in such hideous contrast to the undisturbed daily lives of his fellow Americans.

Importantly, Klay is careful not to pass judgement upon Price's state of mind. The first-person narration allows Klay to merely present Price's perspective as a reality for soldiers returning from war. Price's status as a perpetrator is not glossed over, with glimpses into his attitudes toward Iraqi deaths evident at the outset of the story as he equivocates on the horror of a dog drinking blood by commenting that "it wasn't American blood, but still" (Klay 2014, 1). Significantly, Price's trauma is not attributed to precise acts against Iraqis, but rather his own exposure to insecurity and violence while in the role of perpetrator, travelling through cities aware that "there's a million places they can kill you from" (Klay 2014, 12). We are not called to pity Sergeant Price but merely bear witness to the reality that, despite efforts to reacclimatise soldiers on their return home, wars create a sub-set of citizens for whom the comforts of American hegemony are no longer accessible.

Klay becomes more forceful in his unveiling of the ways in which post-9/11 wars are damaging for American society as he approaches the role of masculinity in war. As Gibbs, drawing on Brian Jarvis, notes, "military power structures seek to 'colonise the soldier's gendered identity and to develop a militarised body that must be permanently hard and function with mechanical efficiency'" (2014, 185). The soldier comes to understand masculinity and war as inextricably intertwined, to the extent that to fail in the context of war is to have one's masculinity, now a trait key to self-worth, tested or proven lacking. Thus feelings of shame or "impotence" arise where soldiers find themselves at odds with the experience of war, whether suffering injury or merely coming to understand the justifications behind the war as shambolic (Gibbs 2014, 173). This distortion is designed to produce unflinching warriors for whom feelings of fear, doubt or guilt are recognised as "womanly, and therefore to be shunned" (Gibbs 2014, 185). Trauma arises, then, when soldiers are unable to avoid these "womanly" feelings and they become alienated from themselves, assigning shame to those parts of their psyche that cannot perform the necessary bravado.

While this pressure to conform to standards of masculinity is not peculiar to the Iraq War, as Gibbs points out this war became ultimately viewed in the West "as unclear in aim, and having been based on spurious and ulterior motives" (2014, 171), resulting in a stronger sense of alienation among combatants involved in the Iraq War than in previous conflicts (Gibbs 2014, 171). Thus trauma born of impossible standards of masculinity also results from the conflict, as soldiers experience greater degrees of failure as the weight of a post-9/11 American hegemony seeking recovery through demonstrations of unyielding strength bears down on their shoulders.

In an analysis of how this culture of masculinity impacts female soldiers, Gibbs explains that the "strongly patriarchal environment" of the military presents considerable potential for trauma among female soldiers (2014, 193). Female soldiers are simultaneously excluded—and often overtly threatened—by the hyper-masculinity of the military environment and under particular pressure to conform to its expectations, lest they appear weak. Additionally, as Gibbs notes, the post-9/11 wars in Muslim majority countries have created new opportunities for the abuse of female soldiers and their entrance into the ranks of those suffering from perpetrator trauma (2014, 193). The deliberate use of female soldiers to interrogate and torture Muslim men in order to enhance their humiliation, according to Aziz Huq, forces them into "morally clouded roles" in which they are "both perpetrator and victim in different measures" (cited in Gibbs 2014, 193); of course, it should also be acknowledged that many female soldiers participate in such interrogations willingly, subject to little or no coercion, and will not identify as victims. Nevertheless, the readiness of patriarchal military structures to, as Huq puts it, "deploy" the sexuality of the female officer in this way and "turn her body into an *instrument* of torture" reveals a culture that routinely jeopardises or overrides women's autonomy (cited in Gibbs 2014, 193, emphasis in original).

Significantly, neither Fountain nor Klay—with the exception of one peripheral character in Klay's "After Action Report"—feature women among the military personnel in their narratives. Instead, they focus entirely on male service-people and deal with the phenomenon of perpetrator trauma as it relates to the standards of masculinity imposed on the dominant demographic in the American armed forces. The inclusion of women in these narratives is confined to episodes depicting their victimisation as male soldiers take out their frustrations on female civilians. For Klay in particular, the task of addressing perpetrator trauma through the representation of toxic gender dynamics takes a grim form in "Bodies". This story, the fourth in the collection, features a protagonist with one of the more distressing jobs chronicled in *Redeployment.* As a Marine working for Mortuary Affairs it is the responsibility of this unnamed recruit to collect the bodies of fallen troops in Iraq. The protagonist and his colleagues are not actively involved in killing: they are the people sent in the aftermath of an engagement to deal with the devastation. As members of the American armed forces in Iraq they are not exempt from the status of perpetrator, however; instead, their removal from the battlefield proper merely enhances feelings of alienation. These Marines in particular have been exposed to the chaos and violence underpinning global American hegemony and have also been denied the opportunity to affirm their masculinity within this construct; they must simultaneously come to terms with their exposure to violence and their relative impotence within conflict.

For Klay's protagonist, the trauma engendered by the perceived failure of his masculinity in war manifests as disdain toward women. The speaker wonders whether he might "handle" the emotional aftermath of war "better if Rachel", his former girlfriend, had stayed with him following his deployment (Klay 2014, 55). Klay describes a military environment that has no respect for women's agency when a package containing Rachel's naked photographs is discovered by a more senior officer. Our speaker attempts to eat the

photographs so as to spare her the humiliation of having them sent around the platoon, a move that incenses one commanding officer and prompts a lecture "on how a true Marine" would "share naked photos of his girlfriend" (Klay 2014, 58). Thus the notion is established that women exist as objects to be exploited for the relief of those experiencing daily tests of their masculinity, only to manifest more dangerously as Klay's protagonist returns home on leave and seeks out affirming encounters with women. When encountering women with whom he does not have an established personal relationship, the Marine no longer maintains the pretence of respect for women as autonomous human beings.

On a trip to Las Vegas, the insecurity bred by war emerges as a predatory attitude toward women. Corporal G is identified by our speaker as the "one to go out with if you want to get laid" because "he's got a whole system" (Klay 2014, 59). This system is described as akin to hunting, complete with strategies and tactics for approaching individual women; disturbingly, this involves buying "lots of shots" to lower women's inhibitions while remaining sober himself (Klay 2014, 60). The implementation of this system on the night in question culminates in our speaker going uninvited to the home of a woman he meets at the bar but who is not described as having made any explicit advances toward him. In fact, as G pushes them into a bedroom the woman gives Klay's protagonist a frightened look, an obvious mark of reluctance that he ignores as he "was also scared" but knew what he "was supposed to do" (Klay 2014, 63). This indifference to her fear is underpinned by entitlement, a trait we see emerge again when our speaker visits Rachel and puts his hand on her thigh because he had "been to Iraq and since why not" (Klay 2014, 65). Significantly, Klay's protagonist is not entirely oblivious to the immorality of his behaviour; as he later contemplates his encounter with "38" he admits that "she had seemed so unwilling" and that he was only "almost certain that what happened with her couldn't be called rape" (Klay 2014, 48). As the speaker attempts to justify his behaviour and quell his doubts, Klay establishes

such attitudes as being endemic to a military culture wherein "how drunk the girl was, whether she really wanted you or whether she let you, or was scared of you" does not "bother most Marines" (Klay 2014, 69). Ultimately, the guilt felt by Klay's protagonist amounts to little more than a niggling sense of discomfort easily quieted by his exposure to the systematic abuse of women during the Iraq War. In this way, Klay does not frame his protagonist's behaviour as acceptable; his actions are clearly repudiated within the narrative as those of an entitled young man enacting a toxic, traumatised masculinity. As such, Klay presents a critique of the ways in which those standards of masculinity sustaining the Iraq War effort can have a devastating impact on society, creating victims far beyond the warzone as combatants return to exorcise their demons in a domestic setting. However, Klay's use of first-person narrative perspective means that his female characters are notably denied agency within this story; they are voiceless female bodies, acted upon in ways that are not fully explored by the author. Thus, Klay's critique of the gendered dimensions of perpetrator trauma and its effects on war-time society is focused largely on the ways in which young men are tragically made monsters by their experiences, with the acknowledgement of the women victimised by their outbursts only incidental.

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk suffers similar issues as it depicts the ways in which the Iraq War depended upon a dangerous manipulation of masculinity that ultimately traumatised the young male soldiers expected to conform to its standards. Fountain offers an implicit critique of this culture of masculinity, as homophobic and sexist language pervades the text and soldiers seek to perform their masculinity at every available opportunity but appear childish and ridiculous in doing so. When Hillary Swank is suggested as a contender for Billy's role in their film the prospect rouses "hoots and cheers" from the squad while Billy contemplates the "potential here for humiliation on a global scale" (Fountain 2012, 6). The deliberately exaggerated response to Swank's casting stems only from the assumed

response from the military community regarding the casting of a woman as degrading Billy's masculinity. Fountain's critique of military culture as emphasising a detrimental masculinity falters, however, when Billy encounters Faison, a cheerleader performing at the stadium. As Faison compliments his eloquence in dealing with the reporters he focuses only on her appearance, taking her in as "a compact, curvy package" with "the kind of cleavage that makes men weep" (Fountain 2012, 148). Billy's behaviour toward Faison immediately demeans her, as he disassociates from her words in the same way he has been prone to do with fawning members of the public throughout the narrative. However, in this instance, the narrator notes no discomfort in Billy at Faison's admiration, similar in nature to other guests at the stadium; he is instead distracted by her appearance so that he "barely hears" her as he becomes "absorbed" in the "beautiful shapes her mouth makes as it forms words" (Fountain 2012, 148).

While this might appear self-evidently offensive and therefore containing an implicit critique of Billy's behaviour, Fountain does little to make such disapproval or admonishment explicit. Faison is hardly differentiated from the scores of people who have come up to Billy extolling pro-war rhetoric. As her words float past Billy's consciousness they take much the same shape as their predecessors, touting "*free*-dom", "values" and "*sack*-rih-*fice"*, though avoiding some of the more inflammatory language regarding Muslims employed by other civilians (Fountain 2012, 150, emphasis in original). Oddly, despite the relative harmlessness of her exclamations, Fountain's characterisation of Faison is uniquely degrading. She is presented as an archetypal prop, present in the stadium to cheer on a violent sport celebrating hyper-masculinity and as a conduit for Billy's sexual insecurities. Billy's virginity concerns him throughout the novel; the context of his military service and its premium on a certain standard of masculinity ensures that, despite his youth, Billy's lack of experience is a source of shame. This shame, manifesting ultimately as trauma following the demands of war,

results in his fetishisation of Faison: his experience with her is reduced to "*making out with a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader!"* (Fountain 2012, 155, emphasis in original).

We receive no insight into Faison's motivations beyond vague references to her religion and admiration for the armed forces, any genuine insights precluded by Billy's delimiting and single-minded interest in her sexuality. As Carrie Johnston notes, "Billy is firmly entrenched in a charade that casts any sexual union not as regenerative, but rather as proof of his masculine prowess" (2017, 411). This interpretation of female characters as props for the bearing out of narrative themes is compounded by Fountain's depiction of Destiny's Child as background performers during the halftime show and Billy's most troubling episode of PTSD at the stadium. As Billy struggles, the group "power through it all with a back-leaning hip-heavy sashay-strut that doesn't look quite possible from where Billy is" (Fountain 2012, 230). With this description and the obliviousness of the crowd to Billy's turmoil, distracted as they are by the performance, Fountain demonstrates the ways in which female sexuality—specifically black female sexuality in this case—is appropriated to mask the realities of war. However, despite the importance of this point as a critique of Iraq War coverage, the silence of all three women when not performing—particularly Beyoncé's during Billy's backstage encounter with her—does somewhat undermine Fountain's effort; there is no space given to what it might be like to have one's image used for the promotion of war. Ultimately, Fountain falls afoul of the same pitfalls as Klay in asking his reading audience to bear witness to the malignant gender dynamics created by the Iraq War; by failing to represent female victimhood as separate and worthy of note quite apart from the moral degradation of the male subject, these realities are, if not perpetuated, certainly unmitigated.

The Invisibility of Iraq in American Post-9/11 Fiction

While the representation of American female victimisation is problematic, it is nevertheless granted narrative space that far outstrips the attention paid, in both texts, to the suffering of the Iraqi citizen. In their depiction of the suffering engendered by war in domestic settings far removed from actual combat, Fountain and Klay establish perpetrators as sufferers of trauma; they reclaim the diagnosis of combat PTSD from the state as a politically destabilising occurrence and force the reading audience to acknowledge the ways in which even wars designed to shore up national identities have a detrimental effect on the national psyche. However, the neglect of the Iraqi perspective legitimises concerns regarding the prioritisation of perpetrator trauma, as victims are side-lined or ignored entirely. The phenomenon of perpetrator trauma, with due deference to these concerns, should not be ignored, as Gibbs claims, particularly since it has been "written about" and "represented" in ways that "sometimes make dubious claims to victimhood, or employ rhetorical tropes to overturn the political realities underlying destructive American incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq" (2014, 168). As Gibbs argues, reflecting on American literature of the Gulf Wars, the focus on the traumatic experience of the victimiser can be read as "attempts to overturn perpetrator status", to "deny agency, and to project aggression on to the Other" (2014, 161). Thus Gibbs concludes that "ignoring perpetrator trauma might […] make critics complicit with a discourse which inverts victim status and projects it onto America, by allowing it to pass unchallenged" (2014, 168).

Gibbs' argument is borne out in the ways that perpetrators are foregrounded as primary victims by both Fountain and Klay. The lack of attention to Iraqi suffering could be due to a recognition by these American writers that the depiction of American trauma will contain greater potential for impact than that of an Iraqi citizen already rendered ungrievable, to use Judith Butler's concept, by the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. This possibility

notwithstanding, the absence of Iraqis from these narratives—except as undifferentiated enemy bodies—risks perpetuating their marginalisation on the world stage. In a fashion that recalls Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Klay and Fountain ultimately mount critiques of American imperialism that present a rather one-dimensional image of the non-Western subject; they add to an existing canon of American post-9/11 fiction that prioritises the trauma of the Western citizen distraught by the attacks and the wars that follow.

In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk,* Fountain's narrative pays minimal attention to Iraqi citizenry, whether insurgent or civilian. The narrator recounts Billy's fragmented memory of the battle that made him famous on the banks of the Al-Ansakar Canal, focusing on the death of Sergeant "Shroom" Broom at the hands of the "hajjis" (Fountain 2012, 42); it is never clarified to which faction the Iraqi combatants belong or how many losses they sustained in the skirmish. Instead, the narrative focuses entirely on the death of an American soldier and the trauma experienced by his young squad-mate in having to witness his demise. Later, when contemplating how the battle was covered in news media, Billy's recollection of its last moments are shared. Invoking Japanese suicide attackers of World War II, Billy recalls "a little kamikaze band of eight or ten bursting from the reeds at a dead sprint" while "screaming, firing on full automatic, one last rocks-off martyr's gallop straight to the gates of the Muslim paradise" (Fountain 2012, 125). Significantly, Fountain does not problematize Billy's presumption that the insurgents' behaviour was linked to their religion; this is allowed to stand alongside a gruesome description of their having been blown "apart, hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests" (Fountain 2012, 125). This description of the Iraqi combatants as fanatics reduced to body parts is presented as terrible within the narrative only in its traumatic impact on Billy Lynn as he recalls "sights not to be believed and never forgotten", his mind unable to "leave it alone" (Fountain 2012, 125). In an expression repeated often throughout the narrative, Billy inwardly exclaims "oh

my people", lamenting the moral degradation of US forces in fire-fights such as this (Fountain 2012, 125); he contemplates why mercy toward the Iraqis did not occur to him at the time, concluding that restraint would have been impossible due to a "foreclosing of options that reached so far back" as to have occurred "before all those on the battlefield were born" (Fountain 2012, 125). While Billy's lament succeeds in compounding his characterisation as a tragically corrupted young soldier struggling with the effects of war, Fountain does little to counter the notion that negotiation or mercy is an impossibility in dealing with Iraqis; instead, through the absence of an explicit challenge to this perspective, he prioritises and lends credence to the idea that to continue engaging with an irrational Other will only lead to the further debasement of the American soldier.

Later encounters with journalists somewhat mitigate this carelessness as Billy is required to answer verbally for the presence of the Iraqis and his role in their deaths. Again the Iraqi combatants are undifferentiated, referred to only as "insurgents" or "they", reflecting the reality that the deaths of these men are of little consequence to the media representatives attempting to sketch Billy as an uncomplicated war hero (Fountain 2012, 136). The reporters, an equally undifferentiated gaggle to Billy, ask about the location of the Iraqis when he was attempting to save Sergeant Shroom and respond with laughter when he gives an unintentionally glib response indicating that they were dead on the ground. The reporters, or "the medias" as Billy refers to them, take on the role of the macabre horde, desperate for the gory details of his ordeal (Fountain 2012, 136). Seemingly as one the reporters demand to know if Billy shot the insurgents himself, a question that causes a "rank nausea" to spread "out from his armpits" (Fountain 2012, 137). Billy hedges, apparently unwilling to admit the killings in such blunt terms but eventually relenting and confessing that "it's fine" with him if he "did shoot them" (137). Fountain's narrator informs the reader that Billy means to "say more" but is cut off as the room "erupts in thunderous applause"

(Fountain 2012, 137). In this way, Fountain positions the careless attitude toward Iraqi life as both reprehensible and endemic in American culture in the early years of the invasion; the openness with which the reporters respond delightedly to the death of the unspecified Iraqi Other reflects a troubling indifference to all but American, or more broadly Western, life. However, while Fountain succeeds somewhat in foregrounding and problematizing this indifference— an effort also seen, for example, in his framing of technocratic news coverage as callous in its disregard for the human targets of American weaponry, discussed earlier in this chapter —he nevertheless fails to follow through on this critique by providing space for the plight of the Iraqi citizenry during the invasion. Billy does not give an indication that his expression of indifference to their deaths was exaggerated; nor does he, at any point, wonder about the Iraqis as individuals.

At multiple points throughout the narrative, Billy wonders why no one refers to him as "baby killer" (Fountain 2012, 38). Williams notes that "baby killer" is a reference to the "common (and discredited) image of the spat-upon veteran" that "haunts American cultural memory of Vietnam" and informs much of the present-day rhetoric that places veterans above reproach (529). As Williams points out, Billy marvels later in the narrative at the seemingly unconditional support for veterans of contemporary wars, pointing out that it "doesn't seem to occur to them that babies have been killed" (2017, 219). However, this is the extent of Fountain's own treatment of the Iraqi civilians killed during the war; despite this gesture toward the absurdity of unconditional support for the troops no descriptions of Iraqis are offered beyond the stereotypes noted above. Thus Fountain's contribution to the cacophony of voices extolling the Western perspective in these conflicts, to the exclusion of the Iraqi perspective, ultimately risks drowning out the marginalised Iraqi voice. As noted in Chapter 3, the absence of certain population groups from a narrative is not necessarily a slight on their importance; in *The Blind Man's Garden,* Nadeem Aslam pointedly depicts

Afghanistan as a wasteland, declining to represent its citizenry in detail, in order to highlight its treatment in global politics as a "missing" space (see Edkins 2014). In Aslam's narrative, the absence of Afghan characters is glaring and thoughtfully reflects their marginalisation in global political discourse; narrative space is instead given over to an equally marginalised voice in Mikal, a Pakistani man who is tortured at an Abu Ghraib-like facility in Afghanistan.

For Fountain, the sometimes-demeaning depiction of Iraqi characters and giving over of narrative space to their American counterparts does not subversively emphasise the "missing"-ness of these populations, but rather exacerbates their marginalisation. Phil Klay's text does, however, attempt, not always successfully, to address the existence of the Iraqi combatant as a human subject with nuance. In the story "Psychological Operations" we meet Waguih, an Egyptian American and member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, recently returned to college after a tour in Iraq. Waguih encounters Zara Davies, a newly-converted American Muslim and a virulent anti-war activist. In the conversation that unfolds between these characters, Klay explores complexities of race, religion and nationality as they relate to the post-9/11 period and the 'war on terror'. Significantly, at the outset of this story, Waguih remarks to the reader that "everyone assumed" he had had "some soul-scarring encounter with the Real", a "sojourn to the Heart of Darkness that either destroys you or leaves you sadder and wiser" (Klay 2014, 170). Read as a nod both to Baudrillardian notions of reality and the simulacrum and to Conrad's depiction of empire in Africa, this statement, and Waguih's assertion that it is "bullshit, of course", suggests an awareness of fiction's Orientalist legacy and an attempt on Klay's part to challenge understandings of Iraq as a space where Westerners go to discover the worst parts of themselves, a space that only produces war and trauma (Klay 2014, 170).

Importantly, Klay offers insight into the condition of the Middle Eastern American as we hear of Waguih's experience as an Arab child growing up in the immediate aftermath of

9/11. We are told that the attacks led to Waguih's family being "treated as potential terrorists" and his having suffered racial and Islamophobic epithets at the playground (Klay 2014, 177). By choosing to depict Waguih as Coptic Orthodox rather than Muslim, Klay injects some nuance and diversity into his rendering of the Middle East while also demonstrating the degree of ignorance in the US regarding such spaces after 9/11. By featuring a protagonist with Arab heritage, Klay is able to explore further aspects of perpetrator trauma. Waguih's personal experience of Islamophobia in the West after 9/11, and having a father who "looks exactly like Saddam Hussein", complicates his status as a perpetrator, though he undoubtedly retains the relative privilege granted by his status as a citizen of the US (Klay 2014, 194). In this way, Klay acknowledges that the American armed forces employ people from a diverse range of ethnicities and that the Iraq War was a complex endeavour, especially for those service-people asked to kill for the survival of American hegemony while being Othered at home. Waguih recounts an instance when, during basic training, a drill instructor asked what he would do if his "brother joined al-Qaeda", while other recruits, oblivious to his Coptic faith but registering his Arab heritage, told intimidating stories of family members refusing to work with Muslims (Klay 2014, 196). Similarly, Zara's Muslim American identity invites prejudice; her identity as a black woman renders her new faith fraught with historical and political significance. Zara informs Waguih that her father "thinks Islam is the religion of poor blacks" and that he worries people will think she "picked it up in prison" (Klay 2014, 193). This dedication to nuance wanes somewhat as Waguih begins to recount his experience of war; Klay offers Waguih as a character with a shifting and complicated sense of morality but fails to credit his Iraqi counterparts with the same complexity.

We first encounter Waguih as a seemingly unapologetic veteran of the Iraq War, capable of using his experiences to manipulate others. When Waguih makes an inflammatory

remark toward Zara in class, telling her that killing a Muslim is "how you help an angel get its wings", he is called to an administrator's office for discipline (Klay 2014, 174). During the meeting Waguih's narration reveals the rather calculated process by which he consciously takes on the role of the traumatised soldier, telling the administrator and Zara that he "got shot at in Iraq" and saw people get "gunned down" and encountered "pieces of men", admitting to "laying it on thick" (Klay 2014, 177). This performance of suffering gets Waguih out of trouble as Zara's discomfort is subordinated to his trauma. Significantly, our protagonist is undermined as a reliable narrator as Klay contextualises Waguih's callous bravado within the framework of perpetrator trauma; his detachment from the war and careless manipulation of his experience are positioned as symptoms of a deep unease. Waguih is incensed when Zara apologises to him; he challenges her perception—which he had encouraged—that "the big bad war broke me" and asks her to consider the possibility that it merely made him an "asshole" (Klay 2014, 180). Waguih's regard for himself as a hardened, realistic soldier psychologically unaffected by the war is revealed as a desperate fantasy by his request for a "sit-down conversation" with Zara (Klay 2014, 182). Waguih's aggressive need to centre himself in Zara's knowledge of the war, to explain the conflict to her through his experience, reflects what Gibbs describes as a primary characteristic of perpetrator trauma manifesting as "conflicting urges toward both silence and confession" (Klay 2014, 171). Gibbs explains that these conflicting desires are born out of ambiguous feelings toward the war, or indeed the "lack of an appropriately receptive audience" to receive the experiences of those who find themselves in the role of perpetrator (Klay 2014, 171). In Zara, despite, or perhaps because of, her "combative" nature, Waguih seems to recognise a person whose outspoken opposition to war might provide him with an outlet for the guilt he feels (Klay 2014, 169).

The process of undermining Waguih's victimhood and the more forceful delineation of his status as a perpetrator begins as Waguih recounts the first death he witnessed in Iraq. Waguih tells Zara of a boy, unnamed and referred to in the story as "hajji", who was shot by a fellow Marine from a distance; protocol demanded that they remain in position until the boy's heat signature faded out (Klay 2014, 189). Waguih watched this happen through a scope, technology allowing the shooter and himself to maintain a comfortable distance from the reality of the boy's death. The boy is described as having a "small body" but is not given a name; nor do we get a sense of his political affiliations or the specific reasons why he was targeted (Klay 2014, 191). He is reduced to fading body heat and the antagonist in a Marine's war story. The extent to which such individuals had been rendered bare life and stripped entirely of their personhood is evident as Waguih struggles to regard the kill as murder; when Zara refers to it as such, he tells her that "even you don't think it's murder", a statement that, despite Klay's efforts to more forcefully depict Waguih as a perpetrator through Zara's disapproval, is oddly not interrogated within the text and suggests a degree of justification to killing in a warzone (Klay 2014, 186).

Zara pointedly asks who the boy was, a question that momentarily flummoxes Waguih until he is able to re-contextualise the Iraqi within his own experience of the war. To Waguih, the boy's death is not a tragedy in and of itself but evidence of a failure on his part, "a stupid death" the likes of which he was "out there to prevent" (Klay 2014, 190). Prevention, in this case, refers to Waguih's role as part of "Psychological Operations", a unit "supposed to tell the Iraqis how not to get themselves killed" (Klay 2014, 190). The campaigns run by such units were ostensibly designed to teach Iraqis how to interact with American forces, or as Zara describes it, convince them not to "fight" the soldiers "invading" their "home" (Klay 2014, 191). In reality the Marines "would be sitting there waiting, hoping some dumb muj would make a suicide assault" because "nobody wants to be the guy in the

squad who hasn't killed anybody" (Klay 2014, 191). Klay positions Zara during this conversation as a proxy for the reading audience, horrified by Waguih's story and the apparent nonchalance with which he regards the deaths of civilians and combatants alike. The war is described as something of a game for the American forces, in which they prove themselves through violence against an undifferentiated and inhuman Other. Zara's perspective here allows Klay to interrogate Waguih's self-centred approach to story-telling, reminding him insistently that a "good number" of the people killed were children and forcefully pointing out the warped morality of the war (Klay 2014, 191).

In this way, Klay does not allow Waguih to appear sympathetic as he recounts the methods and "propaganda" employed to torment Iraqis (199). In this section of the story, Klay manages to reach beyond the mere framing of American armed forces as perpetrators—to the extent that this is undeniable—to access the precise horrors committed against Iraqis. Waguih describes their use of music— "Eminem and AC/DC and Metallica"—over loudspeakers alongside the looping of a "deep, creepy, evil laugh" to drive their targets out of Mosques so that the Marines could "mow them down" (Klay 2014, 201). The horror of these tactics, coupled with graphic insults delivered in Arabic and other Iraqi languages, exemplifies the culturally degrading tactics described by Judith Butler in *Frames of War.* By devising methods of torture, often of a sexual nature, that would inflict maximum distress upon Muslim targets, Western forces could complete their dehumanisation and exert total domination. Despite his insistence that he still supports the war, Waguih seems desperate to confess his participation in the worst of these atrocities, feigning a pride in his actions and insistently telling both his father and Zara that the targets were not al-Qaeda but "just desert fuckers who didn't like having Americans roaming around in their country", a dislike that Waguih defiantly describes in this way as needlessly contrarian or even insolent (Klay 2014, 208).

Ultimately, by revealing Waguih's determined description of both his own indifference and the inhumanity of the Other as self-consciously constructed under the strain of perpetrator trauma, Klay is able to mount a broader critique of the system that makes necessary such wrangling. Waguih is not positioned within the narrative as an individual who truly understands his role in war as justified—a positioning that might condone his brutality—but rather as a soldier whose background and experiences have left him quietly desperate for vindication or, failing that, forgiveness. In this way, Klay presents a depiction of perpetrator trauma that does not fully elide the suffering of the victim in favour of a sympathetic portrayal of the guilty party; he is able, in this early part of the story, to communicate the horrors of the Iraq War and its cultural violence without asking the audience to prioritise the soldier as the truly victimised subject.

However, as the story closes Klay fails to fully acknowledge the pain of the Iraqi citizenry. Waguih is not ultimately framed as entirely undeserving of the forgiveness he craves as Zara, even in her anger, takes pity on his increasingly obvious torment and offers comfort. Waguih remains steadfast in his bravado-filled narration; he tells Zara that veterans "usually laugh" when he tells them the story of the boy and the heat scope, goading her to outrage (Klay 2014, 211). As she rises with "anger lighting her face" Waguih awaits a "response", one he hopes will allow him to feel superior as her anger "clouds" her mind and prevents any truly insightful critique of his behaviour (Klay 2014, 212). Klay emphasises here the extent to which Waguih has been debased by his actions in the war, needing to drive his opponent to rage-driven incoherence in order to feel above her judgement. In this way, even as Klay highlights Waguih's status as a perpetrator in a fashion that convincingly critiques the Iraq War as a conflict fought through the routine dehumanisation of the Other, we remain problematically focused on his pain as the narrative reaches its end, undermining earlier efforts to de-centre Waguih's victimhood. Zara points out the fact that her Muslim faith does not grant her the ability to offer forgiveness simply because his crimes were

committed against other Muslims, signalling Klay's acknowledgement that she is not entitled to absolve Waguih. This disclaimer notwithstanding, as the story closes Zara looks down at Waguih as though "passing a sentence" and tells him that "it's okay" and that she is "glad" he "can talk about it", unfortunately foregrounding the unburdening of the American soldier and his burgeoning ability to narrate his trauma as the ultimate concern of the narrative (Klay 2014, 212).

Conclusion

The danger, of course, in this preoccupation with the recounting of Western trauma is the further marginalisation of the Iraqi perspective. Through Waguih, Klay provides insight into the horrors of the war itself but does not actually pause to render an explicit, specific critique of the depiction of the dehumanized Iraqi insurgent or give narrative voice to these perspectives; such critiques are limited here to implicit nods toward the wrongheadedness of views such as those expressed by Waguih. The insurgents, though set apart as "not al-Qaeda", are undifferentiated and animalistic once provoked, running senselessly out of Mosques to their deaths (Klay 2014, 208); though we might read this as coming through Waguih's perspective and thus as subversive in its absurd one- dimensionality, there are no non-violent interactions with Iraqis or glimpses of those who do not storm American tanks. Other stories in Klay's collection offer slightly more in this regard: "Prayer in the Furnace" finds an innocent Iraqi man beaten by Marines, and in "After Action Report" we witness the death of an Iraqi child, though we remain primarily concerned with the impact of such events upon the psyche of the American soldier. Meanwhile the destruction that Iraq has borne in recent years goes undocumented throughout, rendered a secondary concern to the condition of those who helped bring about the country's ruination. In this sense, despite their dedication to the critique of American hegemony, both Klay and Fountain demonstrate that the task of writing fiction in the post-9/11 context is one that overburdens the author writing from and about spaces like Afghanistan and Iraq. In demonstrating the plight of the American soldier and the degradation of the national psyche

during war time, these authors are building on an existent literary canon and speaking to a Western audience that need not be convinced as to the validity of their perspective. Klay and Fountain follow a path well-worn by novelists of past wars such as Erich Maria Remarque (*All Quiet on the Western Front),* Tim O' Brien (*The Things They Carried)* and even Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse 5),* committing to narrative form the experience of war and asking for the attention of a Western audience that has proven itself more than receptive to stories from the frontlines and sympathetic to the plight of the soldier.

For those novelists representing more marginalised or silenced perspectives in post-9/11 discourse, like Hosseini and Aslam, the task at hand is altogether more daunting. These novelists write against the grain, attempting to access memory frames in the West that exclude the histories of places like Afghanistan and the legacy of Western powers. Of course, these writers also enter their work into a well-populated canon of post-colonial novels, narratives that 'write back' to global centres of power and advocate for marginalised perspectives. Despite the existence of these forbears, however, the authors writing such perspectives in the post-9/11 context faces a unique set of challenges. To begin with, such authors sit uncomfortably within the canon of post-9/11 fiction, as the genre more typically refers to the brand of literature dealing with the crisis of identity that ensued in the West after the attacks, seldom addressing the aftershocks experienced globally. Once established as post-9/11 writers, they must then de-centre the fall of the Twin Towers as the singular instance of rupture most other texts in the genre accept them to be, instead highlighting the violence that had long plagued other parts of the world under the yoke of Western, and latterly American, hegemony. Ultimately, they must destabilise and reveal as false the dichotomies established that justify violence against non-Western and predominantly Muslim spaces, challenging exclusionary cultural memory to trace the origins of present-day turmoil to forgotten Western interference in regions like—but certainly not limited to—Afghanistan

and Iraq. In Fountain and Klay's work by contrast we find post-9/11 war narratives that offer only the recalibration of the dominant hegemonic perspective to consider the plight of the often marginalised soldier and that risk obfuscating the total violence and subjugation of populations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan upon which Western hegemony fundamentally depends; though the insight provided by these texts is useful in its critique of rhetoric and jingoism in the domestic setting, by localising their critique to individual soldiers they risk suggesting that America, as the most powerful Western nation, need only better live up to—rather than abdicate—its self-styled role as the exceptional nation in order to put right the many wrongs described.

Ultimately, the history that is elided in these texts is of fundamental importance to the state of contemporary global politics. While it is certainly not the sole responsibility of novelists like Fountain or Klay to recount Iraq's beleaguered history, as writers working in what this thesis has outlined as an unavoidably transnational context, their decision to neglect this history, given their focus on American imperialism as damaging, is nevertheless troubling. As journalist Patrick Cockburn writes in *The Age of Jihad,* the invasion and removal of Saddam Hussein created enormous instability in the region so that by "2004 the US Army was fighting two very different wars in Iraq" (2016, 5). One of these wars was against a "Sunni insurgency in which al-Qaeda in Iraq played a leading role" while the other was "against the Shia Mehdi Army militia of Muqtada al-Sadr" (Cockburn 2016, 5). As Cockburn notes, despite diminished coverage among Western journalists since 2008, the "war never ended in Iraq" (2016, 13). Cockburn describes the devastating impact of the invasion upon the status quo as the invaders "dissolved the army and the security services that were the prime instruments of Sunni control over the 80 per cent of the population who were Shia or Kurds" (2016, 34). The invasion was opposed by neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey which, Cockburn argues, were "dismayed to see a Sunni state

replaced with a Shia one likely to have close relations with Iran" (2016, 34). Under these circumstances, the invasion was unlikely to produce any form of stability; ultimately, the "downfall of Saddam Hussein" represented a watershed moment as it "exacerbated, to a degree never seen before", the internal conflict between Iraq's various communities, rendering the possibility of peace increasingly remote as the years wore on (2016, 49).

In a diary entry dated April 2003, Cockburn surmises that the "US might like" to give power back to the "Sunni Muslims who had traditionally ruled", as they, sharing the misgivings of Iraq's neighbours, would prefer to avoid a Shia administration that might be influenced by Iran (2016, 52). However, this was not to be, as parliamentary elections in 2005 brought total defeat to Iyad Allawi, a secular candidate, while the "Shia religious coalition" won overwhelming support in Baghdad and the south of Iraq (Cockburn 2016, 125). Rather than emerging as a moment of unification, the election sowed deeper divides, with Sunni and Kurdish parties strengthening internal support among their own communities but gaining no ground otherwise (Cockburn 2016, 125). The election ultimately proved an early harbinger of the civil war about to take hold in Iraq; Cockburn writes that, "unseen by the outside world", a war began in which "districts where Sunni and Shia lived together for decades if not centuries" were "being torn apart in a few days" (2016, 131). The violence continued unabated so that by the middle of 2006 Cockburn describes a dire situation in which "sectarian massacres happen almost daily", with the UN reporting deaths of 6,000 civilians in May and June of that year (2016, 142). In the background of all of this, of course, is the internment and torture occurring at facilities like Abu Ghraib, diminishing further the credibility of US and British forces and worsening the instability. After US withdrawal in 2011, according to Cockburn, Western interest in the region plummeted (2016, 314), even as the Islamic State of Iraq, Syria and the Levant (ISIS or ISIL) emerged from an alliance with al-Qaeda and overtook them as a major force in Iraq, holding most of western Iraq and a

number of major cities by 2014 (334). Though this latest civil war is beyond the scope of Fountain and Klay's texts, published respectively in 2012 and 2014 and chronicling a much earlier period, they might have offered greater insight into the discord that preceded the rise of ISIS. With 65 million people displaced globally according to the UNHCR, many due to the terrible reign of such groups, perhaps it will be left to authors following in the path of Hosseini and Aslam – Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Hassan Blassim's *The Iraqi Christ* are noted as examples of emerging Iraqi fiction in the introduction to this thesis – to give voice to Iraq's marginalised populations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate the ways in which transnational fiction in the post-9/11 era can intervene in dominant memory discourse and make space for marginalised perspectives. In the introduction, I cited a 2009 Michael Rothberg essay in which he calls for post-9/11 fiction that would interrogate the "prosthetic reach" of American imperialism into "other worlds" (153); Rothberg calls for a fiction that "charts the outward movement of American power", a fiction of "international relations and extraterritorial citizenship" (2009, 153). This call, of course, emerged in a context of a growing body of literature (John Updike's *Terrorist*, 2006; Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, 2007) that had begun to tackle the domestic effects of 9/11, focusing on the traumatic disruption primarily within American society. This thesis examines a selection of texts that, to various extents, move outward from this focus, answering Rothberg's call by exploring the impact of American hegemony abroad and the aftershocks of 9/11 felt in places like Afghanistan as the 'war on terror' began.

In beginning to explore the ways in which these texts re-frame 9/11 as a global instance of rupture with aftershocks felt far beyond a domestic American context, I employed recent developments in memory studies to understand the transnational nature of post-9/11 discourse. Invoking work done by prominent memory scholars (Bennett and Kennedy 2003; Assmann and Conrad 2010; De Cesari and Rigney 2013; Bond, Craps, Vermeulen 2017), I examined the ways in which memory is no longer hemmed in by the nation but instead operates as an increasingly transnational process, traversing national borders through the

movement of people, trade and technological advancements such as the Internet. Building on this understanding of memory as fluid and operating in a global context, I suggested, following Bond (2015), that post-9/11 memory discourse was inherently transnational, with notions of American exceptionalism bolstered not by an inward-looking nationalism, but by a confrontational rhetorical stance that considered American power in terms of dominance over an inferior Other, resulting in the invasions of Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003. I traced the origins of such transnational framing—where Muslim-majority countries were singled out as that inferior Other—over decades, citing Edward Said's seminal *Covering Islam* (1981) to argue that post-9/11 rhetoric placing the US in the role of the righteous superpower charged with confronting a malevolent Islam was far from a new phenomenon.

Crucially, though, the recovery of American authority and confidence following 9/11 involved a distinctly amnesiac approach to this historical precedent. In order for righteousness to appear warranted, the attacks of 11 September 2001 had to appear as a singular instance of global rupture, unparalleled in their severity and entirely unprovoked by US foreign policy. In challenging the accuracy of this framing where Afghanistan and Iraq are concerned, I invoked the work of scholars like David Gregory (2004) and Barnett R. Rubin (2013) to trace American—and also more broadly Western, where British colonial endeavours are included—interference in these countries as dating back over a century, beginning shortly after World War I. As I argue in the introduction to this thesis, the havoc wrought by this interference—particularly, in the case of Afghanistan, the empowerment of extremist forces during the Cold War via CIA operations—was necessarily erased, aided by a media establishment that, with some notable exceptions (Fisk 2016; Cockburn 2016), was content to focus on American military prowess and the patriotic agenda set by the Bush administration in the early years of the 'war on terror'.

This erasure was necessary if the American jeremiad (Bond 2015) was to find an amenable audience and go to war in regions already devastated by American hegemony. The absurd singling out of Afghanistan as the territorial locus of Al Qaeda—an international terrorist organisation with cells in over 40 countries worldwide (Gregory 2004)—and Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a threat equivalent to Hitler's Germany took place without sufficient attention to the historical antecedents of these conditions (Meek 2010). Thus, we can conclude, American memorial discourse following 9/11 was fundamentally transnational, bolstering what Bond calls a "resurgent nationalism" through dominance, rhetorically and literally, over other spaces (2015, 97). More importantly, though, we note the imbalance that this suggests within transnational memory processes—offering something of a counterpoint, following Bond 2015, to Rothberg's optimistic conceptualisations in *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) of a memory discourse built on exchange rather than competition—with far greater influence falling to framings initiated by Western powers and devastating consequences for those whose perspectives are excluded. At the same time, this zero-sum treatment of 9/11 as a cultural trauma with no antecedent in American foreign policy is perhaps inevitably subject to the corrective interventions of those perspectives that dominant narratives seek to deny; the very suggestion of 9/11 as a unique instance of epochal rupture invites us to cast an eye over American interference abroad. In this sense, the tragedy that befell New York in September 2001 can be seen to enter into a dialogic, or multidirectional, relationship with Afghanistan and Iraq's various sufferings and participate in their articulation.

This potential for multidirectionality notwithstanding, my primary interest throughout this thesis has been with the ways in which the authors featured here intervene in post-9/11 discourse to disrupt what nonetheless exists as a glaring imbalance and make space for marginalised perspectives, mainly via the presentation of traumatic narratives that displace

9/11 as a unique, epoch-defining instance of trauma. In the first instance, each text studied here is moulded around that which is not widely known or understood in a given context—they perform a didactic function. For Khaled Hosseini in *The Kite Runner,* this results in a focus on 1970s Kabul, a city that Hosseini depicts as cosmopolitan and not dissimilar to Western cities in the same era, much to the consternation of some critics, as discussed in Chapter 1. In *The Wasted Vigil,* this didactic impulse manifests for Nadeem Aslam in the revealing of Afghanistan's multi-layered past, its Buddhist history as well as its numerous encounters with empire. Aslam's 2013 follow-up *The Blind Man's Garden,* examined in Chapter 3, though a much less didactic text in general, brings readers inside US-run prison camps in Afghanistan to reveal the hidden brutalities of the 'war on terror'. In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and *Redeployment,* Ben Fountain and Phil Klay's respective texts and the subjects of Chapter 4, we learn about the Iraq War from the perspective of the US soldier, encountering nationalism at home, having seen its dark underbelly abroad.

When accessing and depicting the trauma attendant to these contexts I have argued that the authors featured here confront yet another aspect of post-9/11 memorial discourse that works to silence such perspectives. As explained throughout this thesis, not only do these authors confront a memory discourse that is dominated by Western perspectives, they must also contend with a trauma theory that is limited in scope and excludes experiences outside of narrow Western norms. In elucidating this challenge, I draw on recent developments in trauma theory (Craps 2012; Gibbs 2014) that explain dominant Western definitions as overly preoccupied with the event-based model (as per successive versions of the *DSM* and cultural theory posited by influential figures like Cathy Caruth). This event-based model has numerous fundamental flaws, as diagnosed by Craps (2012), that impede their usefulness particularly in communicating postcolonial trauma.

Firstly, the focus on singular instances of traumatic rupture work to exclude from consideration those forms of trauma born of systemic, ongoing oppression and not related to any one incident (Craps 2012, 20-21). Secondly, in applying these definitions to non-Western contexts, and to forms of trauma outside of the event-based model, Craps argues that Western trauma theory can be guilty of a form of "cultural imperialism", eliding the contexts of systemic oppression from which the trauma emerged (2012, 22). Here, principles of "Western trauma counselling" that insist on recovery via talking cure can be enforced (Craps 2012, 23). Where such curative measures are taken toward the individual alone, they do little if anything to tackle the structural inequalities—racism, sexism, legacies of colonial violence—that engendered the trauma (Craps 2012, 28). Finally, in communicating over this chasm and attempting to gain recognition for traumas outside of dominant conceptualisations, these authors must contend with expectations around form as developed in literary trauma theory in the West. Craps points out that it has "become all but axiomatic" that "traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, modernist textual strategies" (2012, 39). As explained in the introduction to this thesis, this belief in fragmented narratives as the natural literary vehicle for trauma is based upon flawed understandings (Caruth 1995; 1996) of traumatic experiences as necessarily unrepresentable in their psychic shock (Gibbs 2014, 14). Nevertheless, the suitability of only fragmented, experimental narratives in depicting trauma has become an orthodoxy in Western trauma theory, an orthodoxy that Craps criticises as Eurocentric and failing to allow for the myriad ways in which trauma can be experienced and narrated (2012, 41).

As we have seen, there are no straightforward or obvious solutions to the challenge of depicting Afghan or Iraqi trauma in the post-9/11 period. Each author studied here pushes back against the inequalities of post-9/11 memory discourse, offering small acts of literary disobedience or fully-fledged counter-narratives and mindful, to varied extents, of the

definitional gaps in the trauma discourse they seek to disrupt. In Chapter 1, I examined the least successful of these efforts, reading Hosseini's depiction of Afghanistan's national trauma in *The Kite Runner* as capitulating almost entirely to Western norms. The chapter argued that in translating this national trauma, the result of invasion and continuous conflict, into a singular instance of trauma—the rape of a young protagonist—Hosseini communicates the visceral nature of the suffering incurred but simplifies and elides its detail to a harmful extent. Ultimately, this results in a narrative that is all too eager to offer readers a cathartic recovery in which the international players in Afghanistan's destruction are not taken to task—with the exception of the Soviet Union—and the wounds of the post-9/11 invasion are glossed over, bearing out Craps' determination that the norms of Western trauma theory are ill-suited to capture the complexity of such contexts.

Chapter 2 looks at what I have argued is Aslam's altogether more intriguing and appropriate approach to the transcultural rendering of trauma. In *The Wasted Vigil* Aslam moves backward from 9/11, tracing Afghanistan's history of colonial occupation to the present day and its lingering trauma. In doing so, I argued, Aslam employs a disjointed narrative structure that is not in service of some nebulous concept of trauma's unrepresentability, but rather its long-term effects within a postcolonial society. Employing work by Sam Durrant (2014) and David Lloyd (2000) on postcolonial mourning, I suggested that Aslam enacts a recalcitrant "rage" wherein trauma is not resolved but echoes throughout the narrative, soliciting witnesses and refusing to be buried. In this way, the colonial sins of Britain, Russia and the US are revealed within the narrative, bubbling up persistently to the surface in ways that de-centre 9/11 and deny its singularity as an epoch-defining trauma.

Chapter 3 charts Aslam's treatment of the more immediate context of the 'war on terror' in *The Blind Man's Garden.* This novel, set in Afghanistan and Pakistan in October 2001, takes up the call for what Durrant has termed an "ethics—and aesthetics—of

hospitality" by opening his "art to the fully realised presence of a haunting" and "bearing witness to histories of exclusion" (2004, 14). Following Craps' writing on the potential of "haunting" in representing postcolonial trauma (2012, 61), I introduced the concept of "ghost-making" in examining Aslam's treatment of families and communities destroyed by the disappearance of loved ones at US-run prison camps. I argued that, by refusing to offer resolution to his characters and sketching the realities of living within unresolved cycles of mourning, Aslam provides insight into worsening ideological intransigence across the globe. By presenting narratives of trauma that, in their liminal and interminable horror, are not accounted for by Western definitions, he displaces 9/11 as an event at the apex of human suffering; he re-frames it, not just as a continuation of old conflicts in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but as the starting pistol for a new age of American imperial brutality. In doing this, I argue, however, that Aslam's purpose is less didactic than in *The Wasted Vigil*. His depiction of unresolved and ongoing suffering in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not an attempt to increase understanding or empathy in a Western reader. It is instead what Craps might term a representation of Afghan and Pakistani traumas "for their own sake" and "on their own terms" (2012, 38).

Chapter 4, finally, explores the ways in which Fountain and Klay, in their respective texts, offer an entirely different perspective on American hegemonic violence in the post-9/11 era. In these texts, I have suggested, we find a controversial focus on perpetrator trauma that demonstrates the damage wrought by post-9/11 militarism in a domestic context. I have read these texts as interrogating the concepts of heroism, nationalism and noble sacrifice that underpin the 'war on terror' and seek to frame the deaths of young soldiers in unnecessary conflicts as acceptable or in service of some greater ideal. I positioned this reading as offering a useful counterpoint to the state-sanctioned violence detailed in Chapter 3, contemplating it as a glimpse into the culture that produces the soldiers responsible for the

torture at Aslam's prison camps. Perpetrator trauma, following Gibbs 2014, is established in Chapter 4 as a worthy subject for fiction and theory, not least in its capacity to demonstrate the ways in which the 'war on terror' and American hegemony in general sits atop a foundation of suffering on all sides. However, I also argue that the value of contemplating perpetrator trauma in resetting global concepts of oppression and violent nationalism is not to be overstated, as Fountain and Klay both demonstrate that where narrative focus is trained on the suffering of American soldiers over that of Afghan or Iraqi civilians, the suffering of the latter group is neglected.

It is useful, in formulating final conclusions, to pause briefly in consideration of several issues that were not the focus of this thesis, but which this work has suggested are worthy of further study and research. Chapter 4 included two narratives that feature the experiences of American soldiers in Iraq rather than texts by Iraqi authors. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the inclusion of two such texts is not intended to shut out the voices of emerging Iraqi writers but to facilitate the study, in this final chapter, of an alternate perspective: that of the soldiers charged with carrying out American foreign policy. Of course, the representation of Iraqi trauma as experienced during the Iraq War is a task that has been taken up by numerous writers in recent years – by Sinan Antoon*, The Corpse Washer* (2014) and Ahmed Sadaawi*, Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), for instance – and the methods they employ to destabilise 9/11 as a singular instance of rupture and make space for their own experiences is an important avenue of further study.

Another area that warrants more detailed attention is trauma narratives specific to women's experiences in spaces like Afghanistan and Iraq during the 'war on terror'. While each chapter here has, where appropriate, addressed the plight of various female characters, perhaps due to the nature of the texts in question—featuring mostly male protagonists and written by men—these concerns have been relegated to a secondary role. For example, I

argued that Aslam's texts in particular offer insight into the ways in which Afghan and Pakistani women often suffer under two oppressive structures: the Orientalist gaze of Western hegemony determined to cast them as without agency and the violence of groups like the Taliban. At the same time, I have suggested, Aslam highlights the resilience of Afghan women and the quiet feminist resistance that is enacted—but not acknowledged by Western media—in pushing back against oppressive forces. By contrast, in Chapter 4, I specifically criticised the ways in which both Fountain and Klay utilise female characters to showcase the trauma suffered by their male protagonists but do not lend these women adequate narrative space to explore their own experiences with war and hypermasculine nationalism; the experiences of women in the armed forces are, for example, entirely absent consideration in these texts. Thus there is ample scope for further study on the subject of women's experience in literature on both sides of the 'war on terror'. While few novels are available at present focused intently on women's trauma in these contexts, some recent examples include *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi (2014) and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), detailing the experience of women as Muslim immigrants in the West, as well as Nadeem Aslam's most recent novel *The Golden Legend* (2017), which focuses mainly on two female protagonists in present-day Pakistan.

These limitations and areas for further study notwithstanding, this thesis has extrapolated recent developments in memory studies to diagnose post-9/11 discourse of the 'war on terror' as inherently transnational. More importantly, it has concluded that this transnational memory discourse is characterised by imbalance, with voices and perspectives from Afghanistan and Iraq excluded and silenced—a dynamic that, in its failure to acknowledge historical violence, has helped perpetuate post-9/11 imperial endeavours in these regions. This thesis fills a gap in recent scholarship by knitting together distinct strands of memory studies—9/11 memorial culture, theories of transnational memorial processes,

and literary trauma theory—in order to merge recent developments in each area of study and produce useful insights into how these affect our understanding of the 'war on terror', its beginning and ongoing consequences.

Most important to this project is the bringing together of these elements with recent work on postcolonial trauma studies to understand the challenges faced by authors attempting to disrupt hegemonic memory discourse via the narration of trauma that is typically overlooked by dominant Western definitions. This thesis, like its predecessors in this realm, offers no definitive answer as to the specific type or types of trauma writing that will most effectively disrupt post-9/11 memory discourse to institute more equitable consideration of trauma across cultures. I do not, for instance, investigate the usefulness of realist modes or venture beyond literary fiction. Thus, this thesis is not an effort to act on critiques made by Craps and Luckhurst on the current state of literary trauma theory and the existent canon of trauma writing by testing out alternate forms. These critiques are relevant here insofar as they illuminate a theoretical orthodoxy that—in its preoccupation with trauma as an instance of unnarratable psychic shock for an individual—contributes to the exclusion of the systemic suffering experienced as a result of colonial intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq and which the authors studied here, in various ways, describe. This project has, however, made specific determinations regarding the inefficiency or unsuitability in this context of Western modes that emphasise trauma occurring within an individual psyche, as in Chapter 1, and the limited value of assessing perpetrator trauma, as seen in Chapter 4. It has also, finally, identified the usefulness of narratives that attend to histories of colonial trauma as a way of making space for marginalised perspectives in post-9/11 memorial discourse. While other scholars (Durrant 2004; Craps 2012) emphasise the usefulness of these modes—particularly those framed as hauntings—for representing the ongoing suffering of colonial trauma more generally, this thesis makes the case that such methods are important to the specific articulation of

counternarratives that de-centre 9/11 as a singular instance of global rupture where it is, after all, the exclusion of particular histories from dominant memory frames that has facilitated renewed imperial violence.

As noted in Chapter 3, this is of particular importance where conflicts that are ongoing as of 2018 (Afghanistan, for example) no doubt continue to engender hauntings in communities like those described by Aslam in *The Blind Man's Garden*. Against the tendency to see 11 September 2001 as an 'end of innocence', this thesis posits that by depicting the ghosts of the 'war on terror'—those who haunt its legitimacy as victims of Cold War violence and those 'made' since October 2001—post-9/11 fiction can reveal the legacies of an American hegemony built on war and domination. In doing so this body of fiction has the potential to offer counter-narratives, correcting framings of victimhood so that they are more inclusive and helping us to envision a future when, as Aslam puts it in *The Wasted Vigil,* "the tears of one side [are] fully visible to the other" (2008, 426).

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