

# The View from Here: Toward a Sissy Critique

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THE VIEW FROM HERE: TOWARD A SISSY CRITIQUE

by

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ABSTRACT  
THE VIEW FROM HERE: TOWARD A SISSY CRITIQUE

Tyler Monson, B.S., M.A.

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This dissertation situates 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American literary studies within a post-civil rights context that recognizes how narratives of U.S. exceptionalism have been employed in service of U.S. empire through the recognition of some groups of difference over others. I argue that always at each moment of inclusion, the nation-state invokes a rubric of militarized masculinity to ensure and expand its normative power, to increase legitimate violence, to gain new administrative capacities, and to advance U.S. economic and militaristic strength. My term militarized masculinity sounds out an ideology of exceptionalism that transcends the literal boundaries of military spaces and bodies to permeate the national public, valuing masculine aggression and disciplined, docile patriotism at once. “The View from Here” analyzes the terms of inclusion of difference at specific moments from the 1970s to the present through the works of writers who understand that state recognition means being folded into the state’s love of masculine violence and write against it. Thus, my dissertation generates a mode of critique from the epistemological position of the sissy figure. I contend that the qualities understood as sissy make up a resistant, antithetical node to state power through its disidentification with it.

In its broader concerns, my work produces a mode of critique that is not universal but connected to its time. It foregrounds literature and cultural texts that do not or cannot assent to instances of racial, gendered, or sexual minority inclusion uncritically. Consequently, these works often are overlooked for inclusion in institutionalized multicultural settings including the university precisely because they give the lie to narratives of U.S. exceptionalism. Rather, I assemble an archive consisting of many forms—essay, poetry, novel, drama, film—by writers who are often queer of color and who speak to the limits of inclusion and imagine radical alternatives to it. This dissertation resituates literary value from its normative mode to the perspective of a sissy figure capable of illuminating and critiquing militarized masculinity as the nation-state’s rubric and its horizon and imagines otherwise.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tyler Monson, B.S., M.A.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

At the time this dissertation project came to be conceived, the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 was implementing its final phase: the elimination of the policy as of September 20, 2011. This date marks the formal recognition of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members in the United States military, a landmark moment for LGB communities and a nod to further gains to come, such as transgender military enlistment, same-sex marriage, and anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ+ citizens. Over the course of writing "The View from Here: Toward a Sissy Critique," the U.S. has come out, so to speak, in significant fashion. It occurs to me now that 2010 was a watershed year signified by the successful passage of the DATD Repeal Act of 2010 as well as the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was an amendment attached to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2010. Both of these approved legislative acts signaled a shift in national sentiment regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer citizens. Certainly, momentum was building from these victories, which were hailed as triumphs for, among other things, "freedom" and "equality." Still, I felt troubled by these moves. The paradox I struggled with has been said best, I believe, by what Chandan Reddy calls "freedom with violence." In his reading, Reddy interrogates how anti-LGBT violence and a massive military defense budget became not only legible, but sensible under the banner of equality under the law:

Not long ago it would have been inconceivable to propose that a US military appropriations bill incorporate the protection of homosexuality, or that homosexual emancipation cast its lot with the sustenance and growth of the military. How did this conjunction become a nearly unremarkable event? How did



the differing institutions and political projects become undisturbed witnesses to this once impossible conjunction? What were the epistemological means for conveying this transition to ordinariness and acceptance in our changed political circumstances? That is, what structures, practices, and formations of thought enabled the felicitous conjunction? (5)

Much of the framing questions Reddy asks about these strange bedfellows, the Shepard-Byrd Act and NDAA (2010) and the DADT Repeal Act, inform my own inquiry about the relationality of queerness and militarism. In his statement on the DADT Repeal Act, President Obama said, “I was proud to sign the Repeal Act into law ... because I knew that it would enhance our national security, increase our military readiness, and bring us closer to the principles of equality and fairness that define us as Americans.” Again, the protection of homosexuality and the desire for security are proudly packaged together and branded as uniquely exceptional—a double move through the acceptance of freedom with violence.

If indeed America was coming out in favor of LGBT inclusion around the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, as I argue it was, its terms of recognition utilized rather normative methods of valuation. That is to say, the formal acknowledgment of LGBT citizens by institutions such as the military, law enforcement, and the juridical system, was such that *some* not *all* became legible to the nation-state. Those who were predominantly recognized ascribed to a neoliberal sexual politics that Lisa Duggan calls the new homonormativity: “it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized,

depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Duggan’s term, “homonormativity,” along with David L. Eng’s “queer liberalism,” “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (3), grant me a grammar from which to launch this dissertation. For instance, these keywords throw florescence on the limitations of inclusion into the nation-state. They identify a shift in and extension of state power as it works through difference, specifically sexual difference cleaved from race, class, and gender. So-called “bad” citizen-subjects emerge under this new order as those who fail or refuse to assent to the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness, and access to service in the military, marriage, custody, and inheritance (Eng xi). Often times, these bad subjectivities are people of color, queer, transgender, poor, foreign born, disabled, or Muslim. All of these “bad” subjects have a history in the U.S. of being pathologized and thought of as potential threats to the well-being of the nation-state, which is coded as white, heterosexual, patriarchal, masculine, Christian, capitalist, and imperialist. I would add to Eng’s list of felicitous citizen-subject characteristics the affirmation of the security state and U.S. empire. Taken together, I argue the rubric for incorporation into the U.S. nation-state is determined by the avowal of a militarized masculinity. I name militarized masculinity to be an ideology of exceptionalism that transcends the literal boundaries of military spaces and bodies to the national public. It values discipline and docility, and it means that one is ready to “man-up” or “straighten up” to the challenge put to them. Acts of violence are primarily legitimate under militarized masculinity because they are rationalized as measures of safety and necessity.

The military, perhaps more than any other state institution, is typically associated with masculinity and strength. Because the military is so venerated in the American imaginary, these attributes get valued over and against other ways of existing, which I'll explain presently. Hitherto, the annexation of homosexuality to the U.S. military was unimaginable, but the terms have shifted to include an exceptional form of national homonormativity, which subtends the already existing (and incredibly powerful) exceptional form of national heteronormativity (Puar 2). I contend that militarized masculinity has been the principle recruitment tool in the project of American empire. That is, the state has found success at moments of political and social pressure at home and globally in absorbing some groups of sexual difference in order to dilute antagonistic social movements and to gain more resources (bodies) to send to war or foreign occupation. Jasbir K. Puar's formulation of "homonationalism" is instructive here. Homonationalism is the "emergence of a national homosexuality ... that corresponds with a the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire" (Puar 2). In this narrative, which she calls "U.S. sexual exceptionalism," the (formerly closeted, newly out) homonormative soldier and the traditional heteronormative soldier work collectively to extend "U.S. nationalism and imperial expansion endemic to the war on terror" (Puar 2). The narrative of U.S. sexual exceptionalism gives license to tout its liberal humanitarian credentials as well as flex its (masculine) strength on the world stage—key to its position as the apex of Western modernity. The U.S. takes its place at this mantle and maintains its position there through the scrupulous maintenance of the terms of modernity. This sea change begins to occur after World War II in what Howard Winant calls the "racial break." Here a change in the racial order saw the U.S. state switch from

practices of exclusion to a practice of inclusion in addition to exclusion. I argue that always at these moments of inclusion there is an avowal of masculinity and violence, which in turn affirms U.S. imperialism. More recently, in what Inderpal Grewal calls the “advanced phase of neoliberalism,” set apart by “waning empire, loss of racial sovereignty among whites, and economic issues as well as social movements based on race, gender, and sexuality,” the notion of exceptional citizen has shifted:

They [exceptional citizens] believe that they can do more than the state and save the empire and the world. Yet they are also concerned about everyday safety and security and thus turn to the security state for protection. These citizens, insecure and imperial, wish to access and maintain the privileges of whiteness to become exceptional and sovereign. Those who pass for white, or try to do so, seek a strong military state yet are historically suspicious about state power. They thus both collaborate and come into conflict with the state in the work of surveillance and security. (4)

The ideology of militarized masculinity is pervasive, extending beyond the military soldier into the civilian realm, permitting *some* citizens to utilize new technologies to mobilize and reconfigure security—made known through racist, sexist, classist, queer-antagonistic, and transphobic ideologies—in such a way as to distinguish the “good” subjects from the “bad,” or those who enact legitimate violence from those whom this violence is visited upon. U.S. imperialism/ militarism, the neoliberal economy, and whiteness, working together to secure militarized masculinity, has conditioned an uncritical patriotism that lauds its militaristic strength and multicultural diversity while it

simultaneously instigates violence with impunity on those who cannot or refuse its conditions for inclusion.

In naming militarized masculinity as that ideology governing the incorporation of some over and against others, I am better able to revisit my initial hesitation to celebrate the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. What I felt in this disorientation and discomfort, rather than what I was seeing, reading, hearing, was the specter of queer politics hovering just above and outside the frame of the coverage of the "gains" in "equality." I needed a critique that did not jive with normative, and now homonormative, politics. And since militarized masculinity was the organizing principle in maintaining and expanding the hegemonic order, I propose a critique from the epistemological position of a sissy figure as a disruptive force in this ideological apparatus. I define the sissy figure as a bad subject formation marked as the subject that cannot be affirmed by militarized masculinity. Qualities of the sissy figure—weakness, effeminacy, and other worldliness—make up a resistant, antithetical node to state power through their disidentification with it. Thus, the sissy figure is not only an identity, but it also ascribes a powerful critique of state power. My invocation of the sissy figure is inspired by Roderick A. Ferguson's call to approach this epistemological position as a site of knowledge. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson argues for intellectual inquiry that is heterogeneous, and performs this task by connecting the regulation in African American culture of "people like the transgendered man, the sissy, and the bulldagger" within canonical sociology and with questions of from American cultural studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies, African American studies, and ethnic studies (ix). The mode of critique he employs, queer of color analysis, must work to

“debunk” the notion that race, gender, sexuality, and class are “discrete formations, apparently insulated from each other” (Ferguson 4). This nexus of intersectionality, made to be occluded by liberal ideology, has genealogical roots in women of color feminism, where “women of color theorists have historically theorized intersections as the basis of social formations” (Ferguson 4). Queer of color analysis takes up this line of critique by “investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (Ferguson 4). My formulation of sissy critique is informed by and extends queer of color analysis through the subjugated knowledge of the sissy figure and it is not a single, universal critique, but one connected to its time.

I locate and construct my mode of sissy critique in cultural and literary studies. Lisa Lowe provides a kind model for my cultural approach: “Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined” (22). Culture becomes a recourse for imagining otherwise (to the citizen-subject) when the state moves to quell and suppress dissent “by governing subjects through rights, citizenship, and political representation” (Lowe 22). Likewise, Jodi Melamed offers a model for my literary approach through her formulation of “race radicalism,” a term to “refer to antiracist thinking, struggle, and politics that reckon precisely with those aspects of racialization that official antiracisms screen off: the differential and racialized violences that inevitably follow from the insufficiency and nongeneralizability of human value under U.S.-led transnational capitalism and

neoliberal globalization” (47). When official antiracisms use literary studies (i.e. reading minority literature as a way of getting to know and engage with racialized difference) to marginalize radical antiracisms, “the roots of radical antiracisms can be found in literary texts themselves” (Melamed 49). Melamed reminds us that literary texts have often been the spaces to reveal the “conditions of violence that official antiracisms sustain and disguise (as they organize contemporary knowledges and social forms)” (Melamed 49). This dissertation recognizes American cultural and literary studies as fundamental sites to register sissy critique. If militarized masculinity marches to a linear concept of space and time, giving the illusion that the modern nation-state is has been built through progress and inclusion, an alternative comparative analytic I’m calling sissy critique navigates moments of state inclusion via militarized masculinity with a critical eye, radical gestures, and revolutionary imaginings.

My dissertation foregrounds literature and cultural texts that do not or cannot assent to specific instances of racial, gendered, or sexual minority inclusion uncritically. Consequently, these works often are overlooked for inclusion in institutionalized multicultural settings including the university and its various disciplines precisely because they give the lie to narratives of US exceptionalism—equal access to the American dream, capital accumulation, and rights-based freedoms. Rather, I assemble an archive consisting of many forms—essay, poetry, novel, drama, film—by writers who are often queer of color and who speak to the limits of inclusion and imagine radical alternatives to it. “The View from Here” resituates literary value from its normative mode to the perspective of a sissy figure capable of illuminating and critiquing militarized masculinity as the nation-state’s rubric and its horizon and imagines otherwise. The title

of the dissertation comes from James Baldwin's speech to the National Press Club within a year of his death in 1986. Here he laments America's aversion to history and to intellectual curiosity. In short, he describes a national unwillingness to acknowledge sins of the past and instead prefers the lethargy of cultural amnesia. He speaks this truth to power from, as he says, the grandson of a slave, a black man in America, a writer, an activist, and a homosexual. It's not a particularly hopeful speech, but his work had been more reflective and critical since he published *No Name in the Street* in 1972. I tread here for a moment because Baldwin is, I believe, the progenitor sissy critique. In *No Name* there section titled "To Be Baptized" that begins, "All of the Western nations have been caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism; this means that their history has no moral justification, and that the West has no moral authority" (404). Here Baldwin moves his reader into a contemplative space, to reconsider the order of things by stripping the power from the Western world. Power functions without concern for morality, which, when grafted upon militarized masculinity, strips away its claim of legitimacy to any number of violences perpetrated by the nation-state. Here I'm thinking of slavery, Jim Crow laws, immigration bans, detention and incarceration, lynching, deportation, colonial tutelage, and so on. Power as such cannot maintain itself by force alone, it always produces its weakness or undoing. Baldwin writes that for "power truly to feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power—or, more accurately, an energy—which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control" (406). In my argumentation in this dissertation, I argue the sissy figure harnesses this energy at the perpetual consternation of militarized masculinity. For example, the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy submitted the military to a



constant and irrational paranoia—who among them is the homosexual? The threat of force, Baldwin tells us, does not work the way advocates seem to think it does, “On the contrary, it reveals the weakness, even the panic of his adversary, and this revelation invests the victim with patience” (406). And so the sissy figure perseveres, never to be legible to the nation-state, but through simply existing as such, represents a irruptive, radical energy—two black queer men kissing in public spaces, the gay Filipino immigrant child channeling Donna Summer in full view of the neighbors, the anti-Zionist, pacifist playwright, the transgender soldier who leaks war logs for the world to see, the poet who challenges what it means to be a black citizen in white America, and the queer black boy who returns the hard white gaze by catching up all of the soft moonlight. It is in these sissy figures that I imbue with a critique of the militarized masculinity (Power), and who I argue will inherent Baldwin’s vision:

When power translates itself into tyranny, it means that the principles on which that power depended, and which were its justification, are bankrupt. When this happens, and it is happening now, power can only be defended by thugs and mediocrities—and seas of blood. The representatives of the *status quo* are sickened and divided, and dread looking into the eyes of their young; while the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they *can* endure everything. They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this—paradoxically—by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built.

## Chapter Outlines

My dissertation situates 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American literary studies within a post-civil rights context that recognizes how narratives of US exceptionalism have been employed in service of US empire through the recognition of some groups of difference over others. I argue that always at each moment of inclusion, the US nation-state invokes a rubric of militarized masculinity to ensure and expand its normative power, to increase legitimate violence, to gain new administrative capacities, and to advance US economic and militaristic strength. “The View from Here” analyzes the terms of inclusion of difference at specific moments from the 1970s to the present through the works of writers who understand that state recognition means being folded into the state’s love of masculine violence and write against it. Thus, my dissertation generates a mode of critique from the epistemological position of the sissy figure. I contend that the qualities understood as sissy make up a resistant, antithetical node to state power through its disidentification with it.

My first chapter, “Out in a Realm of Invisibility and Complicity: Essex Hemphill’s Black Queer Militancy,” explores the radical act of two Black men kissing as revolutionary in the neocon-era of the Reagan and Bush administrations. I contend that the Reagan administration’s social welfare reform efforts, along with the continued “war on drugs,” echoes the 1965 Moynihan Report, which effectively pathologized Black matriarchs for the lack of economic progress in Black communities. Specifically, the Dept. of Education’s Under Secretary Gary L. Bauer’s “The Family: Preserving America’s Future,” codes its unnamed pathologized subject as homosexual largely because the right to marry and the right to serve in the armed forces (again, an echo of the

Moynihan Report) are impossible for this citizen subject. Thus, I give a comparative analysis that renders Black queers as kin to social death. Counter-intuitively, I argue that Hemphill's poetry and essays, in addition to his HIV/AIDS activism advocate a togetherness in social death and gives expression to a Black queer militancy. Drawing from Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," I recast social death as a space where sissy critique flourishes and lays bare state violence routed through militarized masculinity.

My second chapter, "Nothing Salvaged: The Making of Global Gay Elites in R. Zamora Linmark's Fiction," explores the trajectory of the character of Vicente/Vince, who arrives in Hawaii as an immigrant child fleeing Ferdinand Marcos' martial law in *Rolling the R's* (1995), and his return to the Philippines as a gay, mobile young-adult in *Leche* (2011). I claim that desire is rooted in and routed through nationalist narratives mediated by militarized masculinity. In *Rolling the R's* immigrant students like Vicente are constantly exposed to disciplinary forces—school, parents, whiteness—working to assimilate them into America. Their solace is expressed through a queer vector, a disidentification with American pop culture which they play out with each other. In this text, queer acts and play resist the violence of the American assimilation narrative. In Linmark's companion novel, *Leche*, queerness fails to be resistant. As a result, I claim that Filipino nationalism is always already a citation of Western nationalisms operating under the US-model of militarized masculinity. Vince's tour of the Philippines finds him in the company of the nation's financial and cultural elite, including its First Daughter. Here, despite Vince's homosexuality, the image of America and the Philippines coupled illustrates this point. In my restructuring of a sissy critique, I wonder how we are to understand terms of desire—for independence, for allegiance, for belonging—when they

are mediated through capitalist extraction and development? I posit that what we lose when we lose the queerness in lieu of an elite gay-ness is a failure to flip the script, and as inevitably, as Vince learns, emptiness.

I call my third chapter “Seeking Out Strangeness: Imperial Feminism and Queer Futurity in *Homebody/Kabul*,” because in it I contend that rhetoric of women’s liberation primarily in Muslim-nations were coopted and weaponized as an alibi for war immediately following the terrorist attacks in the US on 9/11/2001. I read Laura Bush’s radio address to the nation as a call to arms and to invoke a hetero-panic that would call into question not only the patriotism of dissenters, but their masculinity too. Tony Kushner anticipates this moment even before the 9/11 attacks in his play *Homebody/Kabul* (2001)—a pre-emptive anti-war play that scrambles the structure for the war by will of women who want liberation. I argue the scandalous defection of the homebody as a wife and mother living in London to Taliban-run Kabul disorders an under-theorized Western womanhood, as well as the notion of family. I evoke a sissy critique through José Muñoz’s articulation of queer futurity, specifically queer trace, queer ephemera, and queer time, to reorder “family” in a new formulation—one made up of women, the homebody’s daughter and an Afghani woman she brought back from her effort to recover her mother. Such a reading exposes the absurdity of the imperial venture and imagines the new relationalities among women from different nationalities and generations.

I conclude with a fourth chapter titled “The Sissy Vantage: Re-visioning Suspect Citizens,” in which I examine the nation-state’s ever-expanding repertoire of surveillance and domestic militarization in service of assessing who is deemed an appropriate citizen

patriot and who becomes suspect. This process has been theorized to correspond with how the body presents itself, and thus, I focus my comparative analysis to transgender and Blackness in three trajectories: 1) a study of Chelsea Manning that involves her “act” of leaking classified military intelligence to WikiLeaks, shared recognitions of oppression between a white transgender soldier and Iraqi and Afghani civilians under U.S. military occupation, the extraordinary sentencing and tortuous treatment of non-normative inmates within U.S. military and immigration detainment facilities, and the commutation of her sentence by Barack Obama; 2) a reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014) in relation to quotidian microaggressions visited upon Black bodies, the subversive and transformative use of the second-person point-of-view within the lyrical form, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement organizing in response to systemic racism in America; and 3) extending that movement to what I claim to be one of its most significant expressions in Barry Jenkin’s *Moonlight* (2016). Here, a Black queer film transcends all that mark it as suspect—Black and immigrant community (Liberty City, Miami), poverty, single-mother addicted to drugs, gay—to a hopeful iteration of life depicted in feminine, sissy qualities—water, food, vulnerability, softness, touch, moonlight. These trajectories are not disparate but entwined in a collective struggle for social justice.

## Chapter II: Out in a Realm of Invisibility and Complicity: Essex Hemphill's Black Queer Militancy

In his introduction to *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill makes a searing proclamation: “I speak for the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race” (liv). These words come under the subsection called “Loyalty—A prelude to coming home,” and it’s an apt heading for the intention of his life’s work. Hemphill emerged as a unique and essential voice in the black gay community in the 1980s, and his project took on immediacy in the advent of the AIDS crisis. To speak is an imperative, not a luxury, for Hemphill. In his poetry and essays he elucidates the lived experiences of a black radical subjectivity. In doing so, he is able to create an intellectual and material space necessary for others in the black gay community to come out, and thus, to come home.

It’s not work that can be done alone. In fact, Hemphill puts his fellow black gays on notice in his proclamation, implying that living with the secret of homosexuality is not only unproductive but a death sentence. There’s also an indictment in the proclamation. As a black gay man, Hemphill offers an epistemological critique of dominant ideologies of capitalism, race and sexuality. Precisely what are the conditions that determine “thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands” of men to live and die in the closet? The first part of this chapter seeks to name these disciplinary conditions as functions of militarized masculinity, and it takes shape in two ways. First is the concept of the heteropatriarchal family, as conceived of and problematized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” or The Moynihan Report. Second is the lack

of a “home” for the black gay writer in American literature in general, and in Black literature in particular. In each of these disciplinary contexts, I will examine the ways in which militarized masculinity has ensured that the black gay body remains invisible while simultaneously championing progress.

The second part of this chapter deploys what I call black queer militancy, a critique and a call to action via Hemphill’s writing and activism. Black queer militancy voices the urgency in which black gays must come out of the closet and live openly in society. It means turning “love that dare not speak its name” on its head; it means undressing masculinity, and therefore undressing notions of nationalism. It’s an embrace of brother to brother, a shared kiss between black men that is hyper-threatening and an act of love. It’s a re-imagining of community that doesn’t need the traditional family to know itself. I read Hemphill’s poems and essays as articulating and living out black queer militancy as both survival strategy and *the* revolutionary act. It must be militant because it must speak the language of the nation-state to be heard; it must be queer to create a new way of being in the world.

To begin, I turn to Hemphill’s poem “In the Life.” The speaker addresses his mother, inviting her to know his truth: “Mother, do you know / I roam alone at night?” (1-2). The speaker cruises “for men willing / to come back / to candlelight” (7-9), outfitted in cologne, tight pants and gold chains (3-5). These lines describe a ritual and performance, one man seeking the company of another for the night—an anonymous intimate encounter. Success is not guaranteed but improved by making his body appealing to other men. “I’m not scared of these men,” he says, “though some are killers / of sons like me” (10-12).

Initially, it's curious that the speaker wants to share this ritual, what we might consider a private matter, with his mother. But for sons like the speaker and Hemphill, it is essential to disclose such information. The identification of the speaker as son acts rhetorically as a way to keep his audience—his mother—close, so as not to dissociate the filial ties that bind mother and child. Such a move is especially important to the speaker's coming out ("Mother, do you know [about me]?"), because homosexuality has historically been grounds for expulsion from the family and otherwise. Said another way, a son's value in the family is contingent upon his masculinity in the traditional heteronormative sense—an attraction to women, marriage and reproduction. Lisa Marie Cacho reminds us, "Value is made intelligible relationally" (13). Speaking from a position of privilege (son) swiftly proceeds to queer that heteronormative subjectivity through the description of dressing up to bring home a man for the night. The category of the son is thrown into what Cacho calls "[p]rocesses of differential devaluation" (18). Such processes use a comparative analytic and "often work invisibly and implicitly, or they may be referenced abstractly as what we are *not* (i.e., we are not "refugees," "illegal aliens," "terrorists," "or "criminals") (Cacho 18, emphasis original). In "In the Life," the category of "son" shifts to "gay son" ("sons like me"), a subjectivity eligible for disavowal of "an already devalued and disciplined categor[y] of deviance and nonnormativity" (Cacho 18). The speaker sees clearly the violence he faces for his very being—a severed relationship with his mother and/or the reality that when seeking out love, black gay men must gamble with death too: "I learned / there is no tender mercy, / for men of color, / for sons who love men / like me" (12-16). These lines inscribe more deeply the speaker as a target for devaluation and discipline in the eyes of the family and



of the nation-state. In relying upon the comparative analytic to know itself, Cacho tells us “in the United States, human value is made legible in relation to the deviant, the non-American, the nonnormative, the pathologized, and the recalcitrant—the legally repudiated ‘others’ of human value in the United States” (18).

In the third stanza, the speaker asserts allegiance to the “‘others’ of human value” when he says, “I chose this tribe / of warriors and outlaws” (18-19). Keenly aware of the appearance of powerlessness of black gay subjects to familial and state violence, what Cacho calls racialized rightlessness, Hemphill insists just the opposite by giving the speaker autonomy. In doing so, he creates the space necessary for other black gay men to join this tribe of warriors and outlaws. This double move to make space and to recruit is part of the work of what I’m referring to as black queer militancy. The category of “sons like me,” “sons who love men,” can also choose to be “warriors and outlaws”—black radical subjectivities whose very presence is threatening because it exists beyond, outside of, the law. “Do not feel shame for how I live,” the son says to his mother, “Do not feel you failed / some test of motherhood” (17, 20-21). In coming out to his mother, the speaker/son is also asking her to reconcile feelings of failure and shame by extending the categories of mother and son beyond their heteropatriarchal constraints. “My life has borne fruit / no woman could have given me / anyway,” he contends, obliging his mother to conceive of creation in more imaginative ways (22-24).

The poem closes with a promise from son to mother:

If one of these thick-lipped,

wet, black nights

while I’m out walking,

I find freedom in this village.

If I can take it with my tribe

I'll bring you here.

And you will never notice

the absence of rice

and bridesmaids. (25-33)

Freedom is at root in the speaker's night cruising. The expression of freedom is attainable only in the erotic charge of night—something dark, roaming, dangerous, criminal.

Hemphill imagines the spectacularly radical potential of two black male bodies meeting in the night and giving each other the gift of freedom. It's a risk and a reward, one to be taken if found. The word freedom itself is at play in this context, as it has been perhaps the foremost democratic principle used in the name of discipline, securitization, surveillance, and violence for those who fall outside the purview of the nation-state's rubric of militarized masculinity. For the speaker's tribe of warriors and outlaws, freedom can only be achieved in outlaw zones. The "village" to which the speaker refers is a metaphorical space for communion, free from the limitations of militarized masculinity.

In the beginning to the poem the speaker cruises to bring men back home to candlelight.

At the end of the poem, that desire to move from darkness to light is extended to his tribe, especially to those in the closet, and to his mother. The village is an enlightened space existing outside of the gender, sexual, familial and legal legibility. Thus, in such a place, the speaker assures his mother she "will never notice/ the absence of rice/ and

bridesmaids" (31-33). I read "In the Life" as Hemphill's political summons. It's a recruitment poem to know the lives of gay men, and especially black gay men, at a

particular moment in time. With the HIV/AIDS crisis killing swaths of the homosexual population in the 1980s and early 1990s, the poem illuminates their sexual lives without shame. It refuses to be complicit through silence.

For Hemphill, the revolution can only come about with a radical revision of family. He is keenly aware of the impulse of the nation-state and the black community in general to turn to the traditional family structure to resolve HIV/AIDS. Because the traditional family is in the service of militarized masculinity, black queer love must express itself not just in the darkness, but live out loud. The speaker/son's invitation to his mother in "In the Life" is a revisionist step. Hemphill isn't interested in deserting the family altogether, but he is working to obliterate its limits of legibility.

The Reagan administration's return to the rhetoric of family values during the HIV/AIDS outbreak borrowed from a kind of moral grammar found in the 1965 report, "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action," better known as the Moynihan Report. Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist and the then Assistant Secretary of Labor, the Moynihan Report sought to explain why the black community, collectively, were not excelling in the post-civil rights era. He concludes the reason that the "gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society is widening" is a problem of family structure (np). Thus, the "establishment of a stable Negro family structure" became "a new kind of national goal" for the federal government (np). I turn attention to the Moynihan Report because it provides the long history of the nation-state's interest regulating the black family in particular. Roderick Ferguson's analysis of the Moynihan Report from his book, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, is especially instructive here:

Moynihan displaced the contradictions that framed the civil rights era onto the African American family. For Moynihan, African American nonheteronormative relations were *the* impediment to such a transformation. The virus of racism had afflicted blacks such that they could not meet the competitive challenges of a liberal capitalist society. While racist prejudice might be irrational, there were objective differences that prevented black achievement. For the sociologist, African American familial arrangements and their nonheteronormative disfigurements spawned those differences. (119)

Moynihan attributes the prevention of black achievement to female-headed households. He writes, “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (29). Such discourse reveals the normative ties that bind the state’s notions of progress (civil rights) to masculine leadership. The black matriarch becomes the devalued and the progenitor of what Moynihan calls the “tangle of pathology” because she is out of line with “the rest of American society.” In general, Moynihan argues that black Americans are at a clear disadvantage because it is a group “operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another” (29). The corrective to the “present situation of the Negro,” Moynihan explains, is the predictable turn to heteropatriarchal regulation: “Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it” (29).

Of course this “Case for National Action” is also a case to eliminate another node of nonheteronormative power, particularly feminine power. According to Ferguson, “the Moynihan Report enunciated liberal ideology through an identification with and conception of the African American male as castrated and therefore bereft of heteropatriarchal entitlements” (122). Moynihan turns to the Armed Forces Qualification Test to demonstrate the “crushing burden,” and perhaps the castration, of young black males. The exam tests the “ability to perform at an acceptable level of competence...that ought to be found in an average 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. A grown young man who cannot pass this test is in trouble” (40). His findings show that “56 percent of Negroes fail it” (40). It is not clear if both African American boys and girls take the test, but it is clear that boys are the prime focus and recipients of state aid. That aid comes in the form of the armed forces. The intervention of the military not only provided for the masculinization of black men, it is also uniquely qualified to offer an equal playing field. Moynihan writes, “Service in the United States Armed Forces is the *only* experience open to the Negro American in which he is truly treated as an equal: not as a Negro equal to a white, but as one man equal to any other man in the world where the category “Negro” and “white” do not exist” (42). In sum, Ferguson tells us, “The Moynihan Report cast racial exclusion as fundamentally feminizing. If exclusion is the trace of feminization, then equality can only be won by recovering the heteropatriarchal loss suffered under racism” (122). Indeed, Moynihan paints the military as possessing a singular “special quality”: “it is an utterly masculine world...a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority, where discipline, if harsh, is nonetheless orderly and predictable, and where rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance” (42). It’s an

escape from “the strains of the disorganized and matriarchal family life” (Moynihan 42). Thus the institution of the armed forces takes the place of father-figure/ patriarch and is able to regulate African American familial practices (Ferguson 123).

Given the tremendous effort Moynihan pays to the solution of the armed forces as a rehabilitative tract, one wonders what happens to the men who do not take up this path. And what about the daughters who grow up in matriarchal homes? Implicit in Moynihan’s preoccupation with restoring masculinity is the fear that the black matriarchal family structure is producing sissy boys and sapphires. The sissy subjectivity epitomizes just the opposite of the militarized masculinity Moynihan calls for in his pitch for the armed forces. It is a subject formation that is not particularly invested in nationalism, military force, subordination, capital accumulation, or masculine authority. The sapphire is similarly pathologized with the sissy and the black matriarch, who she may one day become. The subject formation of a sapphire is typically characterized as confrontational toward men, emasculating, overbearing, and angry. Born from each of these subjectivities is a powerful epistemological critique of state power and its regulation via militarized masculinity—namely, women of color feminism and queer of color critique. Hemphill’s deployment of what I’m calling black queer militarism is part of queer of color critique, and builds off of important work by women of color feminism, which I’ll cover later in this chapter. In an imaginative exercise and example of black queer militarism, Hemphill might respond to Moynihan’s end to “The Armed Forces” section of his report, in which he quotes the Army’s slogan: “In the U.S. Army you get to know what it means to feel like a man” (43), with “In the U.S. Army you get to know what it means to *be with* a man. SNAP!”

In light of this examination of the Moynihan Report, we recognize the speaker/son's mother in "In the Life" as a pathologized subjectivity devoid of social value. The interpretation of the invitation for the mother to know the rituals of her gay son in search of freedom is enriched when the son recognizes her and invites her to join his tribe of warriors and outlaws. The black matriarch and the sissy son are in effect an example of what Cacho refers to as *de facto* status criminals. She writes, "A person does not need to *do* anything to commit a status crime because the person's status is the offense in an of itself" (43). The Moynihan Report sufficiently names the black matriarch as the root cause for the failure of black achievement following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The black gay man, cruising in the darkness of night for a sexual encounter with another man is the embodiment of heteronormativity in crisis. Writing of his sexual awakening as a teenage in southeast Washington, D.C., Hemphill inherently understands the precariousness of his sexuality:

it became apparent that what I was or what I was becoming—in spite of myself—could be ridiculed, harassed, and even murdered with impunity. The male code of the streets where I grew up made this very clear: Sissies, punks, and faggots were not 'cool' with the boys. Come out at your own risk was the prevailing code for boys like myself who knew we were different, but we didn't dare challenge the prescribed norms regarding sexuality for fear of the consequences we would suffer" (*Brother to Brother* xxxv).

For boys like Hemphill, sissy status equates criminality, a deviation from the "male code" and thus targeted for state-sanctioned violence. Cacho clarifies that *de facto* status crime "captures the ways in which criminalized conduct has been intimately linked to the use of

‘status’ to refer to identity categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class... A de facto status crime is not contingent on criminal conduct; it is premised upon bodies perceived to be criminal” (43). The confines of militarized masculinity, articulated here as “male code,” produces criminal-like behavior by black gays navigating their way in the world: “I learned then that sneaking, ducking, and hiding were key components of a homo life simply because of the risk of exposure and the often devastating consequences” (“Ceremonies” 108). We can see the way in which the closet is a survival strategy for black gay men and a tool of containment for heteropatriarchal norms. By linking homosexuality to criminality, militarized masculinity imbues the closet with complicit silence, rendering the black gay man invisible. Hemphill reflects on his participation in this charade in his essay “Ceremonies.” Here, he chronicles his first sexual relationship with a man, George, who ran a grocery store in the neighborhood. He keeps their activities silent from his friends and of course from his family, because despite George being more than 30 years older than Hemphill’s 14 years, the truth was he wanted to learn from the experience. He knew George had many of the neighborhood “homeboys” pass through his hands, yet “our group identity and rapport did not allow for this kind of discussion or candor to occur” (109).

To speak with these other “homeboys” about his sexual initiation at the hands of George would be to dismember social value, and thus to occupy a space of social death. It’s a radical space to occupy because a “focus on social death enables us to start at the places we dare not go because it enables us to privilege the populations who are most frequently and most easily disavowed, those who are regularly regarded with contempt, those whose interests are bracketed at best because to address their needs in meaningful



ways requires taking a step beyond what is palatable, practical, and possible” (Cacho 31-32). Black queer militarism operates within the politics of social death—it is the “freedom in this village” to be taken by the speaker’s tribe, and where the dressings of heteronormativity are not missed. Hemphill writes in “Ceremonies”:

I regret that we were never able to talk about our visits to George. I regret, too, that we were not able to sexually explore one another in the same way that we allowed George to explore us. Ours was truly a fragile, stereotypical Black masculinity that would not recognize homo desire as anything but perverse and a deviation from the expected ‘role’ of a man. The ridicule we risked incurring would have condemned us to forever prove our ‘manhood’ or succumb to being the target of a hatred that was, at best, a result of hating *self* for desiring to sexually touch the flesh of another male. (109)

Hemphill’s lament for his and others’ repressed sexual awakening demonstrates the suffocating nature of the status quo. Both their race and gender signify *de facto* criminal status: “Because ‘status’ assumes embodiment and fixity, *de facto crime* captures the many ways in which people and places of color have become necessary signifiers to recognize illegality or criminality, thus marking certain behaviors as not only illegal but also innate, inherent, and inherited” (Cacho 44). The anxiety of their very being insists upon the performance of stereotypical hyper-masculinity, what I’m calling militarized masculinity. The performance denies the erotic potential that could be achieved through exploring with one another as intimates, friends, and neighbors, and shifts it to a more perilous space and experience to be had with strangers. Of course “Ceremonies” is written in the reflective mode, allowing Hemphill to recognize his sexual awakening and

articulate its surreptitiousness with “regret.” His trajectory into adulthood can be traced to the speaker in “In the Life,” most noticeably through the absence of fear. Put another way, Hemphill embraces social death as part of his being, and in doing so is able to exist outside of and critique militarized masculinity. It is a personal freedom that reads as a threat to heteropatriarchal apparatuses like the family.

The long history of the Moynihan Report can be felt still to this day, 50 years later. But its echo is especially apparent in the moralizing grammar of neoconservative rhetoric in the 1980s and ‘90s. Ferguson explains, “The discourse of black matriarchy bears the trace of a hegemonic formation, one in which sociological discourse, black nationalist movements, civil rights, and neoconservative alliances are entangled... Hence, the Moynihan Report and the pathologizing of black mothers as nonheteronormative provided the discursive origins for the dismantling of welfare as part of the fulfillment of global capital by the millennium’s end” (124). The 1981 Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act, President Reagan’s first budget, began much of the work to dismantle welfare. It did so by sharply increasing defense spending, cutting non-defense expenditures, and a large tax cut. Neoconservatives inherited the notion that minority cultures, signified by the “pathological image of nonheteronormative formations like the female-headed household,” lacked the competitive ethos to thrive in America, and thus they “based their objections to public spending on the discourse of black matriarchy, arguing that black ‘welfare queens’ were getting fat off liberal social policies” (Ferguson 125). Once again, the family became the site for state intervention.

In 1986, after seven months of research by the White House Working Group on the Family, US Department of Education Under Secretary Gary L. Bauer presented

President Reagan with a report called “The Family: Preserving America’s Future,” what I will call the Bauer Report. The report documents the ways in which the government has made life difficult for many American families, walking back some of the policies that came as a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. I offer up the Bauer Report as the successor to the Moynihan Report—another example of the state’s impulse to shore up the heteropatriarchal family. Bauer writes, “It is simply not true that what we do is our business only. For in the final analysis, the kind of people we are—the kind of nation we will be for generations hence—is the sum of what millions of American do in their otherwise private lives” (10). Bauer frames the family as an institution capable of turning around the social ills facing the nation, a consequence of what he calls “The cultural relativism, the value-neutral approach of the ‘60s” (34). The (heteropatriarchal) family is struggling, he argues, because “adults choose not to marry or choose to remain without children,” and “our entire society is now confronted with the fallout from the ‘sexual revolution’ of the last quarter-century,” for example (10). In the first case, Bauer articulates a demographic anxiety: “We can foresee the graying of America, with new strains on social security, the manpower needs of the economy, and the viability of the armed forces” (10). In the second case, he asks: “Was it really just a matter of private choice that has ravaged the country with an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, many of them new and virulent? Is it a private matter that results in staggering medical bills distributed among consumers (through higher insurance premiums) and among taxpayers (through taxes to support medical research and care)? (10).

We can see the ways in which the Bauer Report is predictably preoccupied with sexuality and reproduction as conditions for social value. The coded language of adults

who choose not to marry or do not have children, and reference to virulent STDs suggests homosexuals to be the prominent, although not sole, unnamed pathologized subject. If we read Bauer's examples in relation to the lived experience of Hemphill and others like him in 1986, this claim becomes clearer. By 1985/ '86 HIV/AIDS cases are spiking in major US cities. The illusion of choice, as in "percentage of adults choose not to marry or choose to remain without children," is in fact unlawful for homosexuals, and so too is volunteering for the armed forces. The path to ascribe social value, "medical research and care," for one, is named as a drain on society. "Who pays the bills?" Bauer asks, "In this as in so many other cases, the American family pays, even when it stands apart from the pathologies that inflict such costs, economic and social, upon the body politic" (10). Legibility for black queer subjects like Hemphill is next to non-existent. Cacho makes clear, "recuperating value *requires* rejecting the other Other. Ascribing readily recognizable social value always requires the devaluation of an/other, and that other is almost always poor, racialized, criminalized, segregated, legally vulnerable, and unprotected" (17). In other words, to desire social value is to assent to violence against another Other. Such a nefarious enterprise is precisely what animates Hemphill to conceive of and to deploy queer black militancy.

In doing so, Hemphill must compete against the Reagan administration rhetoric that frames its policies as good common sense; Bauer writes,

American society has reached the point at which it must choose between two fundamentally opposed solutions to the problem of adolescent sex. We must either make a massive, and open-ended, commitment of public resources to deal with the consequences of promiscuity (including illegitimacy, abortion, venereal

diseases, AIDS, teen suicide); or we must explain to the young, for their own good, one clear standard of conduct which tells them how we expect them to grow up. . . . No more excuses for misconduct; we're getting back to basics. (34)

If part of the fight of queer black militancy depends on black queer subjects to openly embrace their sexuality and sexual practices, it must work against state forms of sexual repression. Bauer's false choice frames federally-funded healthcare and sex education as an untenable exhaust on public resources, and makes the case for abstinence as the desirable marker for social value. Indeed, the "Just Say No" campaign to curb teenage recreational drug use expanded its scope to include an abstinence-only policy: "But if these two patterns of behavior are intimately related, if, indeed, they are two parallel expressions of the same ethical vacuum among many teens, we cannot address them in conflicting ways. We cannot hope to fill half the vacuum" (Bauer 33). Bauer's mandate for "one clear standard of conduct" once again inscribes sexual practices as a major priority of the state. "You are not to touch yourself/ in any way/ or be familiar with ecstasy" (1-3), Hemphill writes in the poem "The Occupied Territories;" "You are not to touch other flesh/ without a police permit./ You have no privacy—/ the State wants to seize your bed/ and sleep with you" (14-18).

In "The Occupied Territories," Hemphill expounds what good common sense or "getting back to basics" means for the reality of black queer subjects, in particular. Here, the state pursues its perceived threat by occupying not only the space of bedroom, but the body itself:

The message is clear:  
your penis, your vagina,

your testicles, your womb,  
 your anus, your orgasm,  
 these belong to the State. (22-26)

The anatomy of sexual reproduction and sites of sexual pleasure become contact zones—like security checkpoints at border crossings—to be policed: “The State wants to control/ your sexuality, your birth rate, your passion (19-21). “The Occupied Territories,” read in conjunction with the Bauer Report, elucidates the terms of legibility. The black queer subject, though not explicitly named, is ineligible for recognition because the family, in its heteropatriarchal definition inherited from the Moynihan Report, becomes society’s solution for combating its ills and determining value.

Of course, Hemphill’s “The Occupied Territories” offers up a critique of the violent ways in which processes of social valuation and devaluation are mediated through the crosshairs of sexuality and race. But the poem functions differently when read not as a critique alone, but also as practice. At the end of the poem, the speaker announces: “The erogenous zones/ are not demilitarized” (29-30). In one way, these lines read as natural end to a poem about the state’s oppressive preoccupation with surveilling and disciplining what is deemed to be sexual deviancy. Read another way, Hemphill appears to confront the state at these very contact zones with his own black queer militancy. Here, especially, I draw from Audra Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” to contend that the means to combat this occupation is to know well ecstasy, sexuality, and passion. Lorde informs her primarily female audience that male models of power would have women be suspicious of the erotic, and thus to understand power as that which suppresses the erotic within their lives and consciousness (53). It is indeed a kind of

occupation, the maintenance work of militarized masculinity. However, the erotic is “a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (Lorde 54). In the poem, it can be the measure of the dangerous touch of the self or other flesh to the anarchy of the orgasm. But the uses of the erotic are not restricted to sex. The power of the erotic exists in all aspects of life; in all we do it’s “how acutely and fully we feel in the doing” (Lorde 54). For example, Hemphill’s speaker provides a cypher for black queer militancy in the first stanza:

You are not to touch  
 anyone of your own sex  
 or outside of your race  
 then talk about it,  
 photograph it, write it down  
 in explicit details, or paint it  
 red, orange, blue, or dance  
 in honor of its power, dance  
 for its beauty, dance  
 because it’s yours. (4-13)

Although framed in the prohibited, the celebratory nature of the erotic is clearly present here. *Document it*, Hemphill insists. The militant act is to honor and extol the power of touching, feeling with other outlaws and warriors. In doing so, in honoring the erotic’s power and beauty, one also assents to occupy social death. The act does not demilitarize the erogenous zones, but instead takes them back as arms against punishing

heteronormativity. It's the cruising in public spaces, the SNAP! of a hustler riding a public bus with his married john, and it's the anthologies of writing by queers of color or films like *Tongues Untied*.

To truly know the erotic obliges one to make it manifest in all work—an undeniably empowering and dangerous function. Lorde is critical of a system “which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment” (55). Erotic value and social value, when determined by a rubric of militarized masculinity, are not complimentary. Hemphill’s “The Occupied Territories” verifies the state’s impulse to make sexuality the site for domination and regulation for fit subjects. Legibility is determined via police-permitted access to sites of pleasure—one’s race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, legality, etc. must be contingent with militarized masculinity to pass the checkpoint. Black queer militancy embraces the erotic value instead, and as such, does not ask permission from the state to express itself. Lorde writes, “Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (58). Like Lorde, Hemphill envisions a life worth fighting for through his refusal of the trappings of heterosexuality. His poems work to remake consciousness by openly celebrating the erotic shared between black men—the freedom in this village to be taken.



At a time when social welfare infrastructure is being systematically expelled by a government wanting to “get back to basics,” Hemphill recognizes that black queers will not survive the AIDs crisis if they remain complicit with militarized masculinity in all its iterations: “male code of the streets,” “war on drugs,” “just say no,” the pathology of the patriarchy, the sissy and the sapphire, the increase in defense spending, the social and financial drain of sexual promiscuity, and so on. I close this examination of the family as an apparatus of militarized masculinity with a reading of Hemphill’s poem “Commitments.” Although written in the present tense, Hemphill utilizes the concept-metaphor of haunting through the first-person speaker. In queer studies, Chandan Reddy tells us that haunting has been a key concept-metaphor “used to characterize both the active violence and the limits of modern movements for legal rights and other forms of political practice that seek to claim the state,” and it “has brought to the fore questions of history, archives, law, and violence (149). Hemphill’s “Commitments” offers such critique. Among a series of photographs marking holidays and major family events, the speaker tells us “I will always be there” (1). Each of the pictures are conventionally dressed: “a checkered red and white tablecloth/ laden with blackened chicken,/ glistening ribs, paper plates,/ bottle of beer and pop” (9-12) at a cook-out; “tinsel, candles,/ ornamented, imitation trees,/ or another table, this one/ set for Thanksgiving” (19-22), in other pictures. “When the photographs are examined” (3), the speaker tells us, “I will be pictured smiling/ among the siblings, parents,/ nieces and nephews” (4-6). There is a tension in these lines that run counter to the smile the speaker gives to the camera. Something amiss occurs in each of them—he is in the background of the cookout photo, obscured by “the hazy smoke of barbecue” (8), or in another, “a turkey steaming the

lens” (23). In each case, the image of the speaker is nebulous—a distortion of his form. He is illegible among and against the props and figures of legibility. Whereas the photos document the promise of the future, “The smallest children/ are held by their parents” (14-15), the lens captures the speaker in an arrested state: “my arms are empty, or around/ the shoulders of unsuspecting aunts/ expecting to throw rice at me someday” (16-18). Our examination of these photos lead the speaker to announce: “I am the invisible son” (32).

If we read the poem through the lens of social death, we can recognize that the speaker may actually be dead. In making sense of his death, his immediate audience—his family—is left to “examine” his life through what remains in photographs. Only “[w]hen the silence is exhumed” (2), will his true self come into clarity. Of course, the word “exhumed” hints at a too-lateness, and suggests that his commitments to his family necessitate his need to be closeted. “I am always there/ for critical emergencies,/ graduations,/ the middle of the night” (28-31), he says, expressing the extent of his commitment to his family. For a person in the closet, it is perfectly logical to be immediately present and feel invisible at the same time, especially around intimates. The photos indicate that feeling when examined once more, and the speaker repeats, “My arms are empty/...so empty they would break/ around a lover” (24, 26-27). Hemphill’s language asserts the haunting nature of a closeted life, to feel so empty and unworthy of love and value. In turn, the family is haunted by the son they never had a chance to know. Part of the critique in “Commitments” are the questions put forth to its audience: What are your commitments? Do your commitments fulfill you? What happens when your commitments ensure your unhappiness? The speaker in “Commitments” denies his erotic

power in order to guarantee his social value within the family, and in striving for legibility he confirms his invisibility.

The photographs in the poem are utilized in this reading of “Commitments” as a frame for the what Reddy calls a politics of livability, or what Judith Butler calls precarity (Reddy 169). Each of the photos is a figuration of the social, metaphorically haunted by the speaker. Reddy explains, “the work on haunting emphasizes the set of formations that limn the borders of intelligibility. By doing so, the work gains a political charge in that its disruption of intelligibility can also be a change in the terms by which intelligibility is decided” (170). Thus, the speaker’s presence in the photos exists as a specter among the intelligible—the table cloth, the ornamented tree, the posed group shot. He is seen not as himself but plays as the heterosexual character of who he is supposed to/ assumed to be: “In the family photos/ nothing appears out of character./ I smile as I serve my duty” (32-35). These final lines invoke the militant nature of family as a maintenance apparatus of militarized masculinity. It is precisely in the concept-metaphor of haunting that the speaker’s life can begin to be known. When the silence is exhumed the speaker is no longer invisible but hyper-visible—the epicenter of a family come to crisis. He becomes the political spark Reddy speaks of. In the conclusion to *Social Death*, Cacho explores the conflicting memories and feelings she experienced when her cousin was killed in an alcohol-related automobile accident. She writes, “the empty space he left behind in each of us *necessarily destabilized* the binaries and hierarchies of value that formed the foundations for each of our lives. Brandon was profoundly valued, but we could not tell you why. Still empty, the space of his absence

holds ruptural possibilities, where we must reckon what has always been unthinkable” (149).

Hemphill is particularly savvy to such ruptural possibilities. Although he never indicates whether the death of the speaker disrupts their terms of intelligibility, his death is still the absolute certainty. In his service to familial duty, he remained complicit with the shaming silence of homosexuality. “Commitments” demonstrates the potential for changing the terms of social value, but one must live, and live openly, if they are to affect change. One only need to revisit “In the Life” to see a son who seizes the opportunity to take freedom and invite his mother to join. A commitment to living openly as a black queer in the era of the AIDS pandemic, “responsible for the violent extinguishing of relations, intimacies, lives, and histories at a shocking pace,” is not just disruptive, it’s revolutionary (Reddy169). And although he is writing to a specific moment in time, reading Hemphill from our present vantage, where marriage equality is newly legally recognized nation-wide, reveals the concordant scaffolding of the family. Put plainly, same-sex marriage is an accord between the homosexual couple and the state to participate in normative modes of being. Thus, if we were to imagine “Commitments” to be a poem of the present, the speaker’s unsuspecting aunt might still “throw rice” (18) at him someday—a claim one can make when reading the speaker’s loyalty to family over, and to the detriment of, his sexuality. In contrast, the speaker in “In the Life” will never assent to the institution of marriage because he knows his pleasure (read erotic value) can never come from such a union. He challenges his mother directly, and closeted readers/listeners implicitly, to find value over and around marriage, and not in and through it: “And you will never notice/ the absence of rice/ and bridesmaids” (31-33).

Hemphill incites black queer militarism to save black queer lives and to secure a future for his tribe. To wait for the state's recognition of and relief for these lives during the AIDS pandemic would be perilous—complicit silence must be broken, tongues must untie. Reddy is especially instructive to my thinking and reading of Hemphill's work in this way:

As historically excluded racialized sexual formations enter institutional domains of political life, inevitably forcing a future resignification of the norms that organize those domains, they reveal the limits of the historical and social discourses that seek to tame or hide their disruptive and non-analogous elements. As these discourses seek to translate what they necessarily excluded into their own terms, that translation leaves a racialized remainder. Though these remainders are subject to immense institutional and social violence, since they threaten the veracity of a present social order, they are also what haunts the felicity of inclusion. To accept this haunting, this upheaval of speech and rationality, is to accept the demand to imagine and develop our collective abjections and negations. (181)

In a society in which militarized masculinity remains the constant rubric of state inclusion, as it does and always has in the United States, the sissy subject formation will always be the abject, the negation, the remainder. Hemphill's work offers the lived experience of the institutional and social violence that comes hand-in-hand with being illegible, but it finds strength in this space of social death. Although I yolk my terms sissy intellectual and black queer militancy, the odd juxtaposition seems intuitive when reading Hemphill. The act of haunting is part of the militancy afforded to being othered by race

and sexuality, for example, but so too is the physical act of walking arm-in-arm down the street, which is what black queer militancy is about. It's threatening in its very nature, a challenge to the strictures of legibility. As Cacho puts it, "If the critical task is *not* to resolve the contradictions of reintegrating the socially dead into a capitalist society that sees most of humanity as a necessary but negative recourse, then it makes sense to mobilize *against* preserving this way of life or the ways of knowing that this life preserves" (32-33, emphasis original).

It's important to understand that Hemphill is mindful that black queer militancy is not about obliterating institutions like "family" and "home," but to raze the heteropatriarchal work they do to normalize subjects. He understands these institutions are essential to black queer lives, whether they are lived openly or remain in the closet. "We cannot afford to be disconnected from these institutions," he writes, "yet it would seem that we are willing to create and accept dysfunctional roles in them, roles of caricature, silence, and illusion" ("Does Your Mama" 42). It is these roles that black queer militancy denies as viable. It's a significant posture to take given it has very little in terms of legacy. There is James Baldwin, who is acknowledged in *Brother to Brother* as a progenitor to black queer literature, and just a few other closeted writers like Langston Hughes. But the epistemological position of the black queer subject had never been a formation to mobilize around—not in the civil rights movement; not in the women's movement; and not in the gay and lesbian rights movement. In fact, Roderick Ferguson contends that the hegemonic discourse surrounding black matriarchal families as a result of the Moynihan Report became part of the grammar of the black nationalist movement. Black nationalist groups "agreed with Moynihan's thesis about the emasculating effects

of black women and the need for black men to resume their role as patriarch” (Ferguson 123). Black nationalist Eldridge Cleaver would add homosexuality to the antagonisms of black matriarchy, arguing the way to recover a dying culture and civilization is through black revolution (Ferguson 123-124). Even in their objections to the US armed forces as a method to masculinize young men, black nationalists nevertheless concur with heteropatriarchal status as the rightful mode of power. In a sense, what I have tried to show is that the black queer has, of course, always been a precarious subjectivity, but one that can be summarily evicted in nearly all political and social realms but the family. Yet the family is essential to these realms. The referent of black and of queer signify a body that is hated: “My life seems to be/ marked down/ for quick removal/ from the shelf” (“Heavy Breathing” 13). There is no group marked as socially valued that includes the black queer, including the black social movements that followed formal recognition via the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In her essay “Learning from the 60s,” Audre Lorde writes, “The move to render the presence of lesbians and gay men invisible in the intricate fabric of Black existence and survival is a move which contributes to fragmentation and weakness in the Black community” (143). Thus the imperative fell onto black queers like Hemphill and Lorde to create and evidence of being.

Let us look to Essex Hemphill’s contribution to the 1990 OUTWRITE plenary “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer” as evidential value of the black queer body. Here, Hemphill reads a portion of his essay “Does Your Mama Know About Me?”, focusing on a critique of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men in general, and specifically his photograph titled, “Man in a Polyester Suit.” Namely, Hemphill takes the “post-Stonewall white gay community” to task for not being “seriously concerned

with the existence of Black gay men except as sexual objects” (42). “What is insulting and endangering to Black men,” he says, “is Mapplethorpe’s *conscious* determination that the faces, the heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his Black subjects are not as important as close-up shots of their cocks” (43, emphasis original). The Mapplethorpe photographs signify the distribution of value within the gay community in the 1980s. Black queer bodies were legible only in “constructions of pleasure,” such as baths, bars, bookstores and cruising zones, where the races could “mutually explore sexual fantasies” (44): “When Black gay men approached the gay community to participate in the struggle for acceptance and to forge bonds of brotherhood, bonds so loftily proclaimed as the vision of the best gay minds of my generation, we discovered that the beautiful rhetoric was empty. The disparity between words and actions was as wide as the Atlantic Ocean and deeper than Dante’s hell” (44). When Hemphill expresses this lament in his plenary reading, he comes to tears and takes a lengthy pause to gather himself. The crowd is at first quiet and then shouts of encouragement come to bolster Hemphill, who acknowledges them with a head nod and a thumbs up: “Only an *entire* community’s silence, complicity, and racial apathy is capable of reinforcing these conditions” (45).

Just as Lorde describes how the lives and experiences of black lesbians and gay men are made to be invisible in the black community, Hemphill echoes the impulse within the gay community. And his delivery of his essay transcends the discursive to the corporeal—the exclusion and objectification become more than language or readings through the tears and pauses and gasps for air. E. Patrick Johnson covers this moment specifically in “Quare Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I



Learned from My Grandmother.” Johnson argues that some queer theorists “(mis)read or minimize the work, lives, and cultural production of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color,” and lays the groundwork for how “embodied performance” can be “critical praxis” (131). He gives analysis of queer theorists John Champagne’s account of Hemphill’s tears, which were met with sympathy/empathy and protest (one person booed Hemphill when he finished his reading). Champagne aligns himself with the protestor: “I have to admit that I admired the bravura of the lone booper. I disagreed with Hemphill’s readings of the photographs, and felt that his tears were an attempt to shame the audience into refusing to interrogate the terms of his address” (qtd. in Johnson 132). In particular, Champagne suspects the tears of manipulating the audience, and recounts an “almost masochistic pleasure” expressed in conversation by two whites in the crowd (qtd. in Johnson 131). Johnson equates Champagne’s reading of the event as queer theory’s tendency to ground critique in the discursive rather than the body. For Champagne, “bodily ‘experience’ is anti-intellectual and Hemphill’s ‘black’ bodily experience is manipulative” (Johnson 132). Johnson calls this a misreading because Champagne’s analysis fails to interrogate that, “for the most part, white bodies are discursively and corporeally naturalized as universal” (132): “Historically, white bodies have not been trafficked, violated, burned, and dragged behind trucks because they embody racialized identities” (132). Johnson suggests that the discursive and the corporeal are not mutually exclusive, and turns to bell hooks for an alternative reading of Hemphill’s tears. hooks equates style not with lack of substance, but as having transgressive and transformative potential—an example of “counter-hegemonic cultural practice” in which black cultural identity is centralized (qtd. in Johnson 132-33).

Champagne's reading of Hemphill constitutes himself as a 'sovereign subject' within his theory of anisubjectivity, a positionality that renders him 'overseer' of black cultural practices and discourse (Johnson 133). However, a more complex reading through hooks' framework offers "a confrontation with difference which takes place on new ground, in that counter-hegemonic marginal space where radical black subjectivity is *seen*, not overseen by any authoritative Other claiming to know us better than we know ourselves" (qtd. in Johnson 133).

In this example, I read Champagne's analysis of Hemphill's tears as consistent with the emasculation rhetoric of the Moynihan Report and black nationalism. Hemphill's reading was antagonistic in a few ways: It was critical of an immensely popular and celebrated gay artist who died of AIDS; it was critical of the white gay community's empty rhetoric; it centered radical black thinking—Hemphill was the only speaker of color; and it displayed "bodily experience" through tears. It was confrontational in the way black queer militancy must be, embracing the discursive and the corporeal in its fight to be seen and heard. Champagne does not rise to meet Hemphill at the realm of ideas, to articulate his disagreement with Hemphill's reading of Mapplethorpe. Rather, he plays guard/overseer of intellectualism, as it seems:

If, as Gayatri Spivak has suggested, we might term the politics of an explanation the means by which it secures its particular mode of being in the world, the politics of Hemphill's reading of Mapplethorpe might be described as the politics of tears, a politics that assures the validity of its produced explanation by appealing to some kind of "authentic," universal, and (thus) uninterrogated "human" emotion of experience. (qtd. in Johnson 132)

Can the words spoken from a black queer body be so easily invalidated by his tears? Champagne's understanding Hemphill's "politics of tears" as anti-intellectual and manipulative demonstrates a refusal to recognize an anti-racist critique of Mapplethorpe's photos of black male genitalia. We might consider the way in which Champagne was put-off by the bodily display of black experience and his admiration of the lone boer in the audience as indicative of white supremacist ideology within queer studies and the gay community.

For a few minutes in that room, Hemphill held the floor and put the white gaze in a position of vulnerability. There is strength in the words of his critique, but there is real strength in his tears too—perhaps a feminized strength characteristic of the sissy. Indeed, Hemphill's own body becomes juxtaposed to Mapplethorpe's "Man in a Polyester Suit," yet the man in the photograph cannot speak. He doesn't even have a head, Hemphill points out. In fact, the juxtaposition of the two is an exercise in the comparative analytic that determines value. To elucidate, I turn to Hemphill's poem "Black Machismo":

Metaphorically speaking  
 his black dick is so big  
 when it stands up erect  
 it silences  
 the sound of his voice.  
 It obscures his view  
 of the territory, his history,  
 the cosmology of his identity  
 is rendered invisible. (1-9)

When the black male body is given positive attention in the dominant narrative, that is, when recognizable/legible, it is primarily mediated through the desire for his penis. Hemphill speaks to this truth in his discussion of sites of pleasure mentioned earlier. In this stanza, the erection equates maximum pleasure, but for whom? Clearly an erection is symbolic of pleasure, but it also erases his personhood. Like Mapplethorpe's photograph, the head here is missing, obscured by the erection and "rendered invisible." As a racialized and sexualized object of desire, the black body is only valued in relation to the fantasies of his viewer. Of Mapplethorpe's photographs, Hemphill says, "his work *artistically* perpetuates racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality and desire... Black males are... shown as parts of the anatomy—genitals, chests, buttocks—close up and close cropped to elicit desire" ("Does Your Mama" 42). In fact, when regarding "Man in a Polyester Suit," Hemphill argues that even "his fat, long penis dangling down, a penis that is not erect" still constructs sexual fantasies: "It can be assumed that many viewers who appreciate Mapplethorpe's work... probably wondered *first* how much larger would the penis become during erection, as opposed to wondering *who* is the man in the photo or *why* is his head missing?" (43). How does value shift when the head of the black man is part of the whole picture? Or, what is the value of the black body when it is not accessible as site of pleasure? The second stanza of "Black Machismo" moves to this positionality:

When his big black dick  
is not erect  
it drags behind him,  
a heavy, obtuse thing,

his balls and chains

clattering, making

so much noise

I cannot hear him

Even if I want to listen. (10-18)

On the flip side of the same coin, the flaccid penis is the marker of the undesirable—the figurative shackles of his being. Outside the construction of fantasy, the site of black machismo becomes the marker of his devalued status—he is always already the signifier of racialized criminality (black/queer). What Hemphill does in this poem, and in his critique of Mapplethorpe’s photography, is illuminate the way value is manufactured by the dominant white gaze for the black male subjects. Speaking from a radical black queer subjectivity, Hemphill not only deconstructs the photograph in particular, but, via his poem, names black machismo/masculinity as subscribing to that very same dominant narrative. Said another way, the black body in “Black Machismo” can only achieve a legibility when it performs as an object of desire.

I read Hemphill’s voice as the “I” appearing in the final two lines—or if not Hemphill, a black queer speaker—who is savvy to this power dynamic and refuses machismo altogether. Hemphill’s sissy critique, what I’m calling black queer militancy, refuses to be chained to a binary system of valuation/devaluation. And in such a reading, the noise made by the “heavy, obtuse thing” might sound like “male code of the streets” or cries of emasculation and other shaming of female and queer subjects. It is the tie that binds its subjects to militarized masculinity all the way to its figurative reverent of slave (as in, slave to masculine norms). The black queer militant in the time of the HIV/AIDS

pandemic is not concerned with those black male bodies who cry out for recognition. “Some of the best minds of my generation would have us believe that AIDS brought the gay and lesbian community closer and infused it with a more democratic mandate,” Hemphill tells us, yet he goes further: “the gay community still operates from a one-eyed, one gender, one color perception of *community* that is most likely to recognize blond before Black, but seldom the two together” (“Does Your Mama” 45). The black queer militant embraces the space of social death and works from within this space to create new constructs for living and being. When Hemphill stood up in a room presumably filled with other gays and lesbians and queer folk and delivered his reading, in that moment, he offered a glimpse of what that looks like. And it was his undressing of the dominant narrative within the gay community, and his shift to center the room to a radical black queer perspective, that Champagne summarily dismissed him.

Hemphill’s call to black queer militancy is a call to survive and thrive in social death: “We are communities engaged in a fragile coexistence if we are anything at all. Our most significant coalitions have been created in the realm of sex” (“Does Your Mama” 45). I began this chapter with the strange opening lines of Hemphill’s “In the Life”: “Mother, do you know/ I roam alone at night?” (1-2). The speaker confronts his mother with the truth of his sexuality, a risk he must take if he, and by extension and invitation, she, is to find freedom. “What is most clear for Black gay men is this: we have to do for ourselves *now*, and for one another *now*, what no one has ever done for us,” he writes (45). To wait is to play at a dangerous game, for delaying this moment means to live a haunted life, which really isn’t living at all. To hesitate telling one’s “mama” is to

remain complicit with the rubric of militarized masculinity that renders black queer subjectivity invisible:

We constitute the invisible brother in our communities, those of us who live “in the life”; the choir boys harboring secrets, the uncle living in an impeccable flat with a roommate who sleeps down the hall when family visits; men of power and humble peasantry, reduced to silence and invisibility for the safety they procure from these constructions. Men emasculated in the complicity of not speaking out, rendered mute by the middle-class aspirations of a people trying hard to forget the shame and cruelties of slavery and ghettos. Through denials and abbreviated histories riddled with omissions, the middle class sets about whitewashing and fixing up the race to impress each other *and* the racists who don’t give a damn. (“Loyalty” 70).

Here, Hemphill recognizes that in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, and in the advent of a liberal narrative of multiculturalism that values and thus represents some racialized bodies over and above others, black queer subjects must come out to come home. I close this chapter with a reading of his poem “American Wedding,” which is, I believe, a kind of sissy critique of heteropatriarchal normativity as well as a blueprint for living out black queer militancy. Cacho reminds us that when assessing value, “So much of life and its supposed ‘seminal moments are organized according to the universalized expectations of the family and its gendered roles in naturalizing private property (buying your first home), wealth accumulation (passing down inheritance), and the pleasures of domestic consumption (planning weddings and baby showers)” (165). Hemphill disrupts the “universalized expectation” of the wedding ceremony in its

traditional sense and restages it in a radical black queer subjectivity: “In america,/ I place my ring/ on your cock/ where it belongs” (1-4). Normative power is restructured in these lines in two ways: first, in making america a noun, and not a proper noun, strips it of the power of the capital “A” in order to demonstrate the non-allegiance of the black queer, the sissy, to the nation-state—especially one that renders his very being illegible; second, the signifier of commitment here is the cock ring, effectively queering the ceremonial exchange of wedding bands between husband in wife. Whereas a wedding is also an assent to the organizing principles of the state, the speaker in stages this exchange of vows in the realm of sex. Hemphill grounds his rhetoric in the realm of sex, which exists outside the purview of state: “No horsemen/ bearing terror,/ no soldiers of doom/ will swoop in/ and sweep us apart” (5-9). In the speaker’s representation of “america,” the dominant narrative of the black body is one of self-destruction: “They expect us to call in sick,/ watch television all night,/ die by our own hands” (16-18). The black queer, the other “Other,” is afforded even less attention, and thus better able to assemble the kind of militancy needed to find freedom: “They don’t know/ we are becoming powerful” (19-20). For in fact, “American Wedding” echoes “In the Life” in its search for that dream: “I assume you will always/ be a free man with a dream/.../ Long may we live/ to free this dream” (184). The vow in “American Wedding is “What the rose whispers/ before blooming” (23-24), the potential for beauty, and it is also Hemphill’s vision for the “freedom in this village.” It’s a vision that incites a black queer militancy to combat the militarized masculinity ideology of the closet, which keeps far too man sons invisible. Hemphill calls on his black queer brothers to embrace each other openly, for “Every time we kiss/ we confirm the new world coming” (21-22).



### **Chapter III: Nothing Salvaged: The Making of Global Gay Elites in the Fiction of R. Zamora Linmark**

R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche* is a story of return. The protagonist, Vince, is a recent college graduate who wins first runner-up at the Mr. Pogi pageant in Honolulu, Hawaii. His prize is a trip to Manila, his first homecoming since he emigrated from there when he was nine years old. Filipinos use the term *balikbayan* for someone like Vince. In fact, Linmark opens the book with this definition from Bonifacio Dumpit's *Decolonization for Beginners: A Filipino Glossary*: "**balikbayan**, *noun*. 1. coined by the Marcos regime in 1973 for U.S.-based Filipinos returning to visit the motherland and witness its vast improvements, attributed to martial law. 2. unwitting propagator of martial law propaganda. 3. potential savior of the Philippine economy. *See also Overseas Filipino Workers, brain drain*" (1). It's an ironic subjectivity for Vince since the reason he was sent away from Philippines was due to martial law. But that was more than a decade ago, when Vince went by his birth name Vicente, and we met him in Linmark's 1995 novel, *Rolling the R's*.

What's in a name? The move from Vicente to Vince is perhaps a microcosm of the claim I will make in this chapter. It's represents a shift from the foreign and multisyllabic to the American and monosyllabic, perhaps from the feminine to the masculine. While it's not an unusual practice for immigrants to choose new, more American-sounding names to call themselves, it is curious that in *Rolling the R's*, a book that takes place entirely in Hawaii, Vince goes by his given name, and in *Leche*, a book that takes place entirely in the Philippines, he goes by his chosen name. In short, it's an assimilative maneuver and a critical element for my analysis. I'm interested in the

fashioning of Vicente to Vince as a lens for examining the disjunction between reading queerness as resistance in the former and the failure of queerness to be resistant in the latter. That is the first goal of this chapter.

The second goal is to read *Leche*, which has received considerably less scholarly attention than *Rolling the R's*, as a text about failure specifically in two ways. First, I argue that Filipino nationalism is always already a citation of democratic ideological formations found in Western nationalisms, in general, and operates under the US-model of militarized masculinity, in particular. The farce of this work in the novel is disseminated through pageantry like the Santacruzian parade, a talk show, historical tours, and through language itself. Here I aim to harness these public spectacles to colonial infrastructure like schools and the military. Second, I argue Vince's sexuality aligns itself closely with tenants of homonormativity and to capitalist accumulation. The combination of his homonormative desires and the confidence afforded to him by his US passport frames his prize visit to Manila as the marker of modernity: the tourist. Thus, I contend Vince is made into a globalized gay elite subject—a modern global model minority. Such a claim leaves queer desire empty of the potential it has in *Rolling the R's*, at least from the vantage of the protagonist.

My third goal in this chapter is to make inquiries about the troubling vision of diaspora this text presents. Vince's return to the Philippines comes at the height of Filipino independence sentiment in the summer of 1991. In June, volcanic Mt. Pinatubo has a major eruption, effectively burying Clark Air Base, and in September the Philippines Senate votes to reject the extension of US military presence. Linmark has set his novel in a rich political and cultural moment to make a return, a cataclysmic moment,

really, yet Vince is ambivalent at best. If the Philippines were technically a postcolonial nation following WWII, or more accurately neocolonial, why center a text that takes place at the very instance of US military expulsion around a non-radical-subject (balikbayan) like Vince? Further, how are we to understand terms of desire—for independence, for allegiance, for belonging—when they are mediated through capitalist extraction and development? Why doesn't postcolonial flip the script? Although I ask these questions sincerely, I posit the answer to them lies with the desire for militarized masculinity. It explains the short-lived removal of the US military in the Philippines, as well as its permanent presence since 1992 to today. Linmark has not forsaken queerness for a globalized gay elite Filipino entirely, however. In this section I feature the bakla as a resistant subjectivity to militarized masculinity and read the preeminent film maker Bino Boca, the radical nun Sister Marie, and the cross-dressing hostess Tita G. as counter-hegemonic subjects. Together this reading glimpses the feminine, however transitory in the text, as opening for critique. What's at stake for diaspora, then, is troubling in that queerness, which marks the oddities and contradictions of nationalism, may no longer furnish such commentary.

The title of this chapter quotes a line from the end of *Leche* in which Vince is walking through his grandfather's house. It's his first time here in 13 years, and well after his grandfather has passed away. It's empty: "He took everything with him to his grave, Vince tells himself. He didn't want me to return and reclaim what was mine—my family history, objects from my childhood... Why did Lolo Al do this—erase all the dust and dirt of my past? Why did he renounce everything? *Nothing salvaged*. Nothing. Except this house smelling of newly waxed floors" (354, emphasis mine). I will spend more time

discussing the ending of the novel later on, but I draw attention to it here to highlight the term salvage and link it to failure. To salvage is to rescue, to recover, to recoup; in this case, Vince longs for remnants from his past—proof of his origins here in the Philippines. To salvage is also a term of extraction, which I'd yoke to Vince's globalized elite status. That is, his inability to fathom the reasons for the empty house give evidence to his impulse for individualist material accumulation. Blame is assigned to his grandfather for his frustration and failure to "reclaim what was mine" (354). The irony of this statement lies in its colonialist echo—General Douglas MacArthur's "I shall return." A parallel such as this, I contend, consolidates Vince's allegiance to militarized masculinity and confirms there's no salvaging the sissy here.

As a means of charting the trajectory of Vicente to Vince, I begin by exploring the queer art of failure in a few key scenes from Linmark's first book, *Rolling the R's*. The novel is set in the Kalihi district in Honolulu, Hawai'i during the 1970s and offers a cacophony of narratives from Pan-Asian and Pacific immigrant adolescents. *Rolling the R's* has earned a fair share of scholarly attention from academics in Asian American literary and cultural studies both for its formal elements and for registering critique of US political domination and colonialism through queerness. David L. Eng writes, "Through its multilayered assault of cultural, linguistic, and narrative hybridity, *Rolling the R's* ultimately exposes the uneven production of abstract nationalist subjects through the management and erasure of a host of disavowed social identities and differences" (224). For Eng, the "obsessive queer sexuality" that permeates the entire book is precisely what renders heterogeneous categories of nationality, sexuality, race and class (225). In Linmark's centralizing queer narratives in his text, Eng argues that the US assimilation

narrative—one that requires an abnegation of homeland—becomes substituted by “a queer affiliation that preserves individual histories of development ... [it] allows an understanding of queerness as a form of social and political organization that proffers the provisional identity of a name. This is a name under which progressive politics can be strategized and rallied, one not predicated on the suppression but rather on the engagement of racial, gender, class, and national differentials for its social efficacy and effectiveness” (226).

The novel is playful in form as well. Linmark doesn't focus on just one protagonist moving linearly through the plot, gradually becoming a proper nationalist subject as one might expect from a story of immigrants. Instead it is made up by a collection of vignettes that celebrate the subjugated knowledges of these queer kids. In *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading*, Martin Joseph Ponce discusses *Rolling the R's* “by locating the emergence of queer male sexualities and genders in the martial law period of Ferdinand Marcos, and by highlighting the impact of U.S. popular culture on erotic fantasies” (153). Ponce focuses on several instances of conflict in which a “queer kid” fails “to turn around to the ‘Hey, you there!’ interpellating call of heteronormativity” (Muñoz qtd. in Ponce 165). Jack Halberstam explains in *The Queer Art of Failure* that failure offers its own rewards: “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (3). Because the kids in *Rolling the R's*, including Vince (as Vicente), are marked by their difference—poor, non-

white, multilingual, and queer—their failures to interpellate within ideological state apparatuses of school and family dismantle the logic of success in America underwritten by militarized masculinity. Halberstam explains, “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3).

I would add that failure in *Rolling the R's* short-circuits legibility and reroutes power through sissy subjects. At school, Edgar Ramirez takes on the fifth-grade “bulls” taunts—“Eh, you guys, check out that Fag, Edgar... What, Bakla, you like beef right now? C'mon, Homo. Right here, Sissy. Edga's ooone faaag. He like suck one diiick”—by turning into the “Queen of Mouth & Sizes” (5). Rather than shirk the insults hurled at him, Edgar shifts to offense by asking the bulls to pull down their pants and show him how big they are:

You guys think you so so tough, so so hot cuz you the youngest ones in the Kalihi Valley JV football team? Win one game first before you guys start actin' all macho. No shame or what? Why not pick on your own size, Tiny Tims? That's right. You guys are small, and I mean small, like the Vienna sausage your mothers fry every mornin'. I know mine's bigger than yours. C'mon, pull down your pants. What, scared? Scared cuz mine's bigger than the three of you put together? (5)

Edgar's takedown of his male peers plays on their failures on several fronts. He guts their machismo status by serving up their losing record in junior varsity football and by calling them small, pitiful and weak (Tiny Tims). Even invoking their mothers cooking Vienna sausages for breakfast works to both infantilize and castrate them. In effect, the self-

anointed Queen of Mouth & Sizes has flipped the script, turning this into an advantageous encounter. What was originally meant as a haze to ostracize Edgar based on his queerness has now boxed these bulls into a situation in which they must satisfy the sissy's desire to see them with their pants down or refuse and concede that he is indeed bigger. In either scenario, Edgar wins. But winning is not mediated in hegemonic terms—his embrace of his queerness makes it so. Edgar makes himself strong by channeling his femininity; he is also the Queen of Ice Pack & Curad, the Sham Battle Queen, and so on. On another day in the courtyard, in what his friend Florante calls a re-enactment of the “Fall of Bataan,” Edgar wears his shorts like a French-cut bikini and skips “to the battlefield with one red ball as my tiara, and pose as Queen of Atomic Words” (6). He doesn't always escape the blows of his peers, but they don't break his spirit. Riffing off Florante's invocation of Bataan, Edgar conjures General MacArthur: “But the next day, I march back to the court in my skimpy PE clothes for be the I Shall Return Queen” (6). Edgar messes with memorialization of a national war hero by repurposing this figure for himself, a sissy Filipino American kid duking it out on the school playground. His emblazoned sense of himself as a non-normative allows him to resist conventional forms of disciplinarity and governance. “Edgar Ramirez is a faggot,” (4) readers are told, and everyone knows it. Vicente (Vince) asks him, ““So what are you going to do about it?” ... ‘Nothing,’ Edgar says. ‘Nothing’” (4).

Edgar's espousal of “faggot” is not simply a move by the author to mark the anti-social. He is the dominant voice in a majority of the vignettes that make up *Rolling the R's*. As it happens, Linmark disallows the easy dismissal of Edgar through the character Orlando Domingo. A senior at Farrington High, Orlando curls his hair to resemble Farrah

Fawcett's character on *Charlie's Angels*. He won't answer to anything but Farrah, and wears outfits inspired by each week's episode. His teachers complain about his appearance, "What next?... Principal Shim must do something about this. Ahora mismo!" (24). As do the school's football coaches Mr. Akana and Mr. Ching, "We gotta do something before our boys catch this madness and start huddling in skirts and pom-poms... You gotta do something. Pronto. Suspend him, expel him, we don't care, but you gotta keep him away from our boys if you want the team to bring home the OIA title" (24-25). In his position of authority within the education institution, Principal Shim is tasked with having to "do something" about Orlando. The hierarchy of value is of full display in the complaints of his subordinates, albeit they too are authority figures. Scholar Eric Estuar Reyes contends Orlando "reveals that the norms of American subjectivity are not natural, per se, but are continuously challenged and incorporated into dominant social practices" (127). Militarized masculinity is above all at risk, thus Principal Shim "considers the possibility of expelling or suspending Orlando on the grounds that he is endangering the mental health of other students, especially the athletes" (25). As if the Farrah Flip is something that can catch, those who do battle on the football field and desire to bring home the title get singled out as vulnerable to a cross-dressing student. Much like bulls harassing Edgar, Shim ultimately fails to dominate the queer subject because of his fear. In this case, he "squirms at the thought of Orlando turning the tables and charging him, Mr. Akana, Mr. Ching, and the Department of Education with discrimination against a Filipino faggot whose only desire is to be Farrah from Farrington, as in Farrah, the Kalihi Angel" (25). Linmark has created an unthinkable tension in Orlando because he has also achieved a stellar academic acumen:



Born in Cebu in 1962; Immigrated to Hawai'i at the age of ten; Lives with mother in Lower Kalihi; Father: Deceased; Speaks and writes in English, Spanish, Cebuano, and Tagalog; Top of the Dean's List; Current GPA: 4.0; This year's Valedictorian; SAT scores 1500 out of 1600; Voted Most Industrious and Most Likely To Succeed four years in a row; Competed and won accolades in Speech and Math Leagues, High School Select Band, Science Fairs, and Mock Trials; Current President of Keywanettes, National Honor Society, and the Student Body Government; Plans to attend Brown University in the fall and eventually take up Law. (25)

Eng writes, "Orlando's school file reads like a précis of a model minority's stunning achievement of the American dream. It illustrates a consistent history of superior academic accomplishments in face of material deprivation and in absence of a traditional nuclear family structure" (227). Certainly the narrative of American developmentalism could not read much better than Orlando's file, including championing the underdog as a way of boosting its exceptionalism. Rather than allow Orlando to signify the model minority figure as a tent pole for American exceptionalism, Linmark queers the narrative by stretching "this project to its imaginable limits by bringing together the model minority myth with the image of the flaming Filipino faggot" (Eng 227).

Circuits of power are shorted by sissy diasporic subjects in both examples from *Rolling the R's*. Edgar and Orlando represent identities-in-difference, to borrow a term from Third World feminists, radical women of color, and queers of color, and serve resistance in the form of disidentification. The term disidentification "is a mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure

nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 11). Orlando hits all his marks with excellence within the rubrics of the education system, indicating his fidelity to development within such structure, yet he pays no heed to the dominant ideologies gender norms. The promises of employment and material accumulation are his just desserts, and achieving it as Farrah the cherry on top. Likewise, Edgar’s manipulation of machismo posturing leverages the power away from the bulls. Drawing on the notion that the size of a man’s penis corresponds to his masculinity, he succeeds in emasculating his opponents by demanding they prove their manhood by revealing their size to him. He essentially reorients the encounter to a hyper-sexualized queer one. Neither character merely counter-identifies with the dominant ideology of militarized masculinity. Rather, they gain the system by “working on and against” it—“a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance” (Muñoz 12).

I draw on these two instances from *Rolling the R’s* not to essentialize a kind of queerness, nor to identify two exceptional sissy subjects. They allow me to illuminate the ways in which Linmark offers resistance to and critique of American developmentalism by foregrounding subjugated knowledges of queer kids—subjects who are in many ways set up to fail but are held anyway to the “try again” individualism of neoliberal ideology. Edgar and Orlando are perhaps the loudest examples of this work. Vicente and Florante do similar acts in quieter ways. Both characters are linked by martial law, which saw their families split up and spread across nations during Marcos’ regime. They are also two of three immigrant students, Mai-Lan the other, who are removed from the classroom

every Thursday by Ms. Takara “to teach them a thing or two about integration” (49). Florante is a poet and remarkably attuned to the colonial history of the US. Before fleeing the Philippines, all members of his family except for himself, his mother and his grandfather disappeared because they were political dissidents. Florante believes Ms. Takara to be “two-faced: A Japanese and an American wrestling in one mind. He says that her American upbringing has blinded her from reading between the lines of the history textbooks where silenced people choke from invisibility and humiliation” (48). Florante always already approaches these lessons with Ms. Takara as suspect because she represents two sides of the same imperialist coin. She teaches in “what Florante calls the asphyxiating room” (49). A removed space where she can assert her authority over immigrant students: “It reminds him of the colonial history of the Philippines—from Magellan’s three-hundred-year-old crucifix to President McKinley’s hallucinations to Tsuneyoshi’s camps to MacArthur’s shades” (49).

Linmark undermines the typical teacher-pupil relationship by contrasting Florante’s precocious observations to Ms. Takara and Mrs. Takemotos progress notes to parents. These progress notes act as disciplinary measures by asking parents to intervene and cooperate. In all three notes, each student receives the compliment of having the most beautiful and unique penmanship they have seen in all their years of teaching (rendering it empty). Similarly, each note implores the parents to help their child “gain confidence” and to discourage him/her from associating with Edgar Ramirez and Katherine Cruz (51-54). Readers quickly note the template the teachers use in these progress notes and gather that these lessons are more a means of achieving order and uniformity than it is about teaching and learning. Vicente gets more of an education when he visits Florante’s home,

which is a haven of history and knowledge. The house is covered in Filipino flora—Dama de noches, stephanotis vines and sampaguita shrubs (the national flower of the Philippines), as well as a bountiful vegetable garden and a malunggay tree “marking the soil in which it is planted as owned by a Filipino” (59). The interior of the home is as culturally rich as its exterior, opening up onto a library with books written in Spanish, English and Tagalog lining three walls and stacked on the floor and in the corridor (59). Vince’s attention is drawn to three posters facing the typewriter:

A blindfolded Jesus wearing a barbed-wire tiara is crucified at the center; his lips are stapled shut. The head of the cross is inscribed with the date 1521. To his right is a map of the Philippine archipelago that is striped in red-white-and-blue and looks like the skeleton of a dog sitting upright; to his left is a cartoon of Mount Rushmore bearing the faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Ferdinand Marcos, and Charles Manson. (59)

The unholy triptych gives an unsettling and violent account of colonialism, moving from religious rational, to lethal loyalty, to irreverent memorialization. This imagery undoes the history lessons described in the classroom, where Mrs. Takemoto is “burying her students’ heads in Plymouth Rock or George Washington’s cherry tree or the big migration to the West” (50). It’s a reality that Florante’s family knows intimately, as he explains to Vicente that his younger brother, sister, father and grandmother were chased off the edge of a road and shot because “some people didn’t like what my grandparents and parents were writing” (61). Having come from generations of writers, and growing up among them, Florante is keen to Ms. Takara’s ventriloquizing American history books. His lived experiences as Filipino in diaspora, along with the cultural and

knowledge production that he literally inhabits in his home, enable Florante to see these lessons for what they are—disciplinary acculturation.

My reading of Florante’s home, and Vicente’s visit to it, counters the “special lessons” given to the immigrant students. Vicente is a different kind of student than Florante. Whereas Florante is “a very introverted child” and “a true perfectionist” (53), Vicente is “a happy child, a friendly pupil who is very neat in appearance” but “has a tendency to daydream in class” and hands in assignments 2 or 3 days late (50). Florante writes verse while Vicente reads *Tiger Beat* and *Dynamite* magazines. Contrary to the “asphyxiating room” where they are given their language treatments, Florante’s home offers knowledge in multiple expressions. When Vicente speaks to Florante’s grandfather, Lolo Tasio, he does so in Tagalog. “Where are you from in our country, hijo?” Lolo Tasio asks (60). Vicente replies, “Sa San Vicente po” (60). “It’s good that you haven’t forgotten your Tagalog,” Lolo Tasio says with smile. The exchange is a form of embrace through language. Indeed, Vicente does not use Tagalog at any other point in the novel, using English or pidgin English instead. We might also compare this exchange to Ms. Takara’s instruction: “*Think three not tree. Watch the r’s. Think think, not tink. Th. Th. Th, th. Da ink. No: Th, th, th, th-ink. Think. Prree. F’s, not p’s. Frrree. Do not roll the r’s. Free. Three. Three. Free. Berry good. V. V. Very. I am Filipino, not Pilipino...*” (54). Lolo Tasio, whose face bears the scar “that could only have been formed by a sharp object—a knife, a chisel, the teeth of a dog” (60), draws a contrast to Florante’s appraisal of Ms. Takara’s two-faced, brainwashed approach. And finally, Ms. Takara and Mrs. Takemoto’s generic progress notes seem trivial next the scene in which Vicente hears Lolo Tasio at his typewriter as he “begins to imagine ghosts seeping from his fingers,

telling him their stories plotted with perfect miseries and orchestrated deaths, and souls resurrecting higher, higher than Christ” (62). Through immersion rather than removal, dialogue instead of lecture, Vicente is given an education that he can’t get anywhere else. He doesn’t have the same narrative as Florante, despite his family fleeing Marcos’ martial law as well. He is overwhelmed in this space of history and memory and resistance. No daydreaming here; instead, the sound of typing “at the back of his head” signifies he is engaged (62).

As postcolonial diasporic subjects, the queer kids that make up Linmark’s *Rolling the R’s* bust the imperial myth of liberation, “the interplay of colonial legacies [which] continues to animate a sense of indebtedness to the United States as the ‘rescuer’” (Shigematsu and Camacho xxi). This myth operates under the praxis of developmentalism, which Reyes defines as “an ideology of acquisitive lust with an eternally undeveloped subject, who desires an ever-increasing quantity of cultural and economic capital in hopes of attaining the fulfillment of the promises of modernity. American developmentalism places American democracy and the citizen-subject as evidence of the climatic attainment of that promise” (136). I consider modernity to manage its citizen-subject through the rubric of militarized masculinity. Its function is not so different from colonialist practices of tutelage and containment that separated the civilized from the primitive (Isaac 2). When we approach these terms from the epistemological position of a sissy subject, we recognize developmentalism as the march toward uniformity in the name of modernity. My reading of *Rolling the R’s* hazards failure as key to queerness as resistance. Collectively, the novel’s voices make up what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentificatory subject[s],” who “tactically and

simultaneously work[s] on, with, and against a cultural form” (12). In the face of normative disciplinary apparatuses, they risk the “labor of making a queerworld” (Muñoz 25). This risk of queerness is not “represented as a singularity but as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock” (Halberstam 29). Thus, Linmark’s novel offers up a text that restages dominant and normative conceptions of US modernity to privilege perverse nonnormative forms. It makes the illegible politically legible; or, to improvise from Florante, previously silenced people no longer choke from invisibility and humiliation.

That *Leche* is Linmark’s follow-up novel is intriguing because, as I will argue, the failure of queerness to be resistant gives way to the ascendance of an elite globalized gay Filipino subjectivity. In this text we meet up with Vicente, now Vince, 13 years later. The two epigraphs to the novel come from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Dante’s *Inferno*, so Linmark frames this as a journey in which the protagonist comes to know oneself via peregrination. The form of the novel is similar to *Rolling the R’s* in that it includes several kinds of writing such as a glossary, tourist tips, and postcards, among its narrative. Unlike his first novel, *Leche* is told only through the perspective of Vince, thus losing that queer collective of voices that made up *Rolling the R’s*. We begin the book in the Philippines Airlines departure terminal at Honolulu International Airport, where Vince must navigate the crowd and their balikbayan boxes. “Boxes that ought to be the Philippines’ exhibit at the next World’s Fair,” he notes, “as he navigates his cartload of Louis Vuitton bags in and out of the maze” (2). Linmark immediately draws attention to the Vince’s desire to difference himself from the crowd by contrasting the traditional,

tacky balikbayan boxes with his expensive luxury luggage. In a flashback to his arrival to this same airport in 1978, we learn that Vince was shamed by his own box by a custom's officer when he examines its contents: "Ho, da hauna... Smell like one dead shark. What you wen' pack in there boy?... My goodness, you wen' carry one dead sea all the way here, kid?" (7). Despite winning "Most Likely to Succeed in the English Language" from his class at San Vicente Elementary School, Vince freezes when confronted with the local pidgin dialect. The box filled with his favorite foods, and packed lovingly by his grandfather Don Alfonso, marks perhaps the first moment where we can read Vicente becoming Vince. "I can't believe you stopped eating dried fish because of that asshole, Vince" his brother Alvin says (7). "Well, they do stink," he replies (7). To which Alvin clarifies, "When you became an American" (7). The act of becoming here suggests the porous and unstable notion of nationality. Clarifying that the fish didn't stink to Vince when he was Filipino, in fact they were his favorite, reveals a desire to assimilate from the start.

With this knowledge that only comes from the second novel, we are able to reread Vicente in *Rolling the R's* anew. For instance, unlike his friend Edgar, Vicente's most prominent queer act doesn't end victoriously. Vicente hosts imaginative role play on a stone wall, acting as a stage, two of three times a week. One day Edgar and Vicente perform Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer's "No More Tears (Enough Is Enough)," for an audience made up of their friends and various neighbors who sneak a glance in their direction. With instrumental backing, Edgar takes the role of Barbra, giving Vicente his wish to be Donna. While Edgar embraces the stage and his audience, Vicente sweats



cats and dogs (39). He is encouraged to “Use your imagination, Donna,” and so he gives it a try:

He imagines that Edgar, Katrina, Loata, Florante, Mai-Lan, Bino, and Rowena are not there. No Roberto’s eyes, No Mr. Batongbacal or Mrs. Freitas behind their curtains. He shakes his hips, lets loose his choirboy voice. ‘Enough is enough is enough is enough is I’ve had it.’ ... Altoing loud and clear, Vicente’s imagines strong hands kneading his neck, his shoulders. He stretches his neck to the right, to the left, then back, then forward, the way one does when being massaged by someone like Richard Hatch or Jan-Michael Vincent. He opens his lips and offers his song to the sky. (39)

Imagination allows Vicente to reorder space, time and gender. Through this queer vector, he becomes a disco diva belting out her hit song while getting rubbed down by a celebrity heart throb. It’s a utopic space where circumstances that would prevent this moment from occurring in real life melt away, even though it lasts no even the length of a song. The performance is cut short when the Vicente’s father takes notice: “Mr. De Los Reyes’s face heating up like a volcano about to erupt... [he] climbs up on the wall and grips his son’s neck, wrenching it until Vicente snaps free of his imagination. Then he pushes him off the wall. Mr. De Los Reyes has jumped down from the wall and is pulling Vicente up by the hair, shoving him away from the stone wall and the curtain of eyes trailing after them” (40). The euphoria he experiences on the stage quite literally crashes down at the hands of heteropatriarchy. His father’s violence response is indicative of the impulse to contain and discipline the unnatural, and certainly Vicente registered as such to his father. Mr. De Los Reyes’ discipline becomes a performance in its own right. One look at

Vicente's father is enough to make Edgar and the rest of the gang scatter. No words are used, as the heat of anger renders Vincente/Donna's demise. I read the physical abuse endured by Vicente to be a lesson not only for himself, but a way for the father to demonstrate his authority for the neighbors looking on too. That is, the correction is not just teaching his son not to act feminine, but also a signal to the neighborhood that he is capable of handling the (supposed) threat. The need for such a display of disciplinary violence has to do with the pressures of being racialized as Filipino and immigrants. Through brute force and shame, the promise of modernity is exercised and foreign queerness dominated.

Vince gets a second try on the stage in *Leche*, when he competes in the Mr. Pogi (Mr. Handsome) pageant. After being talked into competing by Edgar, Vince eyes the prize as a way out of Hawaii for the first time since he immigrated there. He and four other contestants move through their choreographed, Paula Abdul mix dance number before their talent portion. Vince does a dramatic reading of Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again." He wowed the audience so well that "[e]ven the blacks, who went there to cheer for Art Johnson, gave me a standing ovation" (98). It's an interesting choice of poem for him to perform. Hughes in large part critiques the promise of the American dream for a majority of the poem: "America never was America to me" (line 5). America has not made manifest the promise it holds for all:

O, let America be America again—

The land that never has been yet—

And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.

The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indians, Negro's, ME—

Who made America,  
 Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
 Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
 Must bring back our mighty dream again. (62-69)

Hughes implores those who, like him, have worked for America but never *had* America to “take back our land again” (line 73). The poem coopts a familiar hopeful optimism essential to the idea of the American dream to both expose it as a sham and a call to action: “O, yes, / I say it plain, / America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath— / America will be!” (lines 75-79). In re-visioning America, Hughes indicts “those who live like leeches on the people’s lives” (line 72) and a system that keeps minorities down, “Tangled in that ancient endless chain / Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! / Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need! ... Of owning everything for one’s own greed!” (lines 26-28, 30).

At first the poem and its dramatic performance seem a natural fit for Vince, Hughes being a queer of color himself. And in fact, it was successful enough to earn him first-runner up. But I’d argue that an element of the absurd pervades the scene and renders Hughes’ critique of America hollow. First, the forum of a beauty pageant for male descendants of the Philippines isn’t in stasis with the tone of the poem, including the Filipino immigrant laborers who would rightly fit amongst those who have yet to attain the promise of America. Second, for a pageant whose criteria requires Filipino heritage, it’s strange that the winner of Mr. Pogi gets a trip to New York City, while the first-runner up gets a trip back to the Philippines. Doubly strange is that Vince’s rendition of “Let America Be America Again” wins him a vacation to the Philippines. Last, there’s

little doubt that the poem is meaningful to Vince if he chose to perform it, but his attitude to the entire pageant is blasé at best, in turn deflating the power of Hughes' words. "It was so humiliating," he notes (98). For Vince, Mr. Pogi is a way out of Hawaii and nothing more. Linmark situates a paradox in which Vince performs a call to consolidate an inclusive America, and in doing so procures passage back to his nation of birth.

The interplay of nationalities plays out throughout the novel. When Vince lands in Manila, he is immediately met with the challenge of his national identity. An immigration officer explains that he is in the wrong line, one for returning Filipinos only. "But I am Filipino. I was born here," he explains. "It says so right there on my passport" (44). Denying his claim, the officer points to the long line marked for "BALIKBAYANS AND OTHER VISITORS" (44). "You *were* a Filipino ... You're *now* a balikbayan with a U.S. passport" (44). The exchange between the two continues, with Vince growing frustrated: "In Hawaii, Filipinos don't see themselves as Americans ... Where on the sign does it say this line's for returning Filipino nationals only?" (44, 45). The officer points out the sampaguita flower, "If you're a true Filipino, Mr. Vicente De Los Reyes ... you'd know that the sampaguita is our national flower" (45). As a diasporic subject, Vince confounds the notion of authentic national identity in this encounter. His US passport betrays his claim to be Filipino, as does his failure to recognize the sampaguita flower as the nation's signifier. Vince's persistence to challenge his right to be recognized as a Filipino reads as disingenuous when his ticket here was gained by performing "Let America Be America Again." If his resistance to being legible only as balikbayan is an issue of that subjectivity's ties to the Marcos regime, Linmark never engages it.

Postcolonial scholar Vicente L. Rafael explains, “Uneasily affiliated with while doubly alienated from the land of their birth and the places of their work, residence, and/or citizenship, these migrant, immigrant, and second-generation Filipino-Americans have become ... significant interlocutors in the political debates and formation of knowledge about Filipinos in the Philippines and elsewhere” (2-3). Vince doesn’t even get out of the airport before he encounters the nation and its technologies of ordering and knowing. Despite being born in and living in the Philippines for the first nine years of life, the signifiers of the Filipino nationals sign and the immigration officer let it be known that he may be *from* but not *of* the country: “You need to stand over there with the other *foreijers* [sic],” he’s told (44). The schism that occurs between Hawaii and the Philippines revises Vince’s ability to claim nationality for himself. In Hawaii he’s considered Filipino, and if we’re to take his rendition of Hughes sincerely, asking to assert his American-ness. In the Philippines, he’s definitively American.

As a matter of fact, Vince’s first obligation as representative of Mr. Pogi is to escort Reyna Elena at a Santacruzán: “an important traditional Catholic celebration in the Philippines and began as a response to the radical changes caused by Spanish colonization” (Manalansan 128). These celebrations are held all over the Philippines in May, are reenactments of “the discovery of Christ’s cross by Queen Helen, or Reyna Elena, the mother of Emperor Constantine of the Holy Roman Empire” (Manalansan 128-29). The Santacruzán has been appropriated so often that it’s hardly a pious observance: “With a flair for colors and music, the Indios embraced the Santacruzán festival immediately. ‘Coercion played a key role in converting the pagan Filipinos to Roman Catholicism... Pageantry insured it’ (Linmark *Leche* 87-88). Rather, Vince

wonders if he's stumbled upon a "Halloween party sponsored by Geritol and Ensure" (88). Matriarchs gossiping about their breast implants, a woman with chains around her neck, wrists, and ankles wearing only a leopard print thong and nipple-covers, and men dressed as Moses carrying tablets all cross paths with Vince, who is the only attendee not in costume. Cross-dressing is also common at these celebrations. It's here that he meets Bino Boca, a world-famous film director, who retrieves Vince's Mr. Pogi sash from the floor. Vince takes the "wispy man in a sunflower-print housedress and horn-rimmed glasses" with "a swarm of yellow curlers" on his head as a dead-ringer for President Aquino. Once introductions are made, Bino give a rundown of Filipino society ranked A to F based on wealth, history, beauty and influence. Once again, Vince is marked by his difference in this scene. He, in plain clothes during the most festive events of the year, is getting a rundown on Filipino society from the country's most famous film maker in drag as the country's president. Yet, Bino tells Vince: "You know, you could be part of the A-list... You really don't need much. Fair skin; an accent, preferably Australian, British, or MTV; and a couple of authentic IZOD shirts. And with your tisooy features, hijo, they'll welcome you, even in your boxer shorts, undershirt, and rubber slippers" (94). Trading on his mestizo features (read whiteness) and American-ness as commodity, the promise of elite status is all but guaranteed. Indeed, in his ethnographic research Martin Manalansan IV makes clear, "In the Philippines, the mestizo, or the white hybrid, is the valorized body" (142).

The contrast becomes one more step bizarre when the nation's First Daughter, Kris Aquino, joins them. Bino asks why she didn't come as Little Orphan Annie as they had agreed earlier, to which she responds: "I know, but Mommy disapproved... She said

Wonder Woman was much more appropriate and patriotic. Plus it goes great with our pro-U.S. military base stand” (95). What better segue to introduce Kris to Vince than that? Aquino is Reyna Elena for the third consecutive year and gets to be escorted by Mr. Pogi from Hawaii. The symbolic alliance between the Philippines and the US takes shape in the couple at the apex of the Santacruzán festival. In this capacity, the episode cements Vince’s nationality as American and Kris as Wonder Woman gestures to a Filipino fidelity to its military presence there. Like Bino, Kris notices Vince’s look as one to be traded in on: “Tito Bino, why don’t you cast Vince in *Machete Dancers II*?... He’s got the right complexion, and the looks of an Amerasian hustler, di ba?” (96). Bino agrees and gives Vince his card to come in for a cold read. He also will get a guest spot on Kris’ talk show as a pseudo-audition. In a single day in the Philippines, Vince has managed “to hobnob with the who’s who in Pinoywood” (96). The rate in which doors to wealth and celebrity open up for Vince is staggering, and none of it is based on more than his appearance and what it signifies. The racial infrastructure of the Philippines, like America, operates on a version of white supremacy. He’s not a flaming faggot like Edgar or Orlando (or Bino) and so his masculinity is tied to his ability to pass for straight. In a sense, he’s the Captain America to her Wonder Woman. The celebration ends with dancing: “Kris rubs against Vince, rolling her hips against his while her body-guards, caught in the music, circle them, snapping their fingers and wiggling their hips,” the songs shift from “Good Vibrations” to “Let’s Talk About Sex” (105). Like conjugal sex on the dancefloor, one would hardly know that that US-Philippines political bonds are at a breaking point.

If the audience at the Santacruzán was the most elite in the Philippines, Vince's audition on Aquino's talk show will acquaint him to viewers of all classes across the nation. Once more, the question of Vince's nationality is raised. When Kris Aquino asks him, "Do you still consider the Philippines your home, Vince?" on her television talk show, he is unable to answer definitely: "No ... well ... yes ... in a way ... I guess. I mean, I was born here, but ... no ... Hawaii is where I've spent most of my life" (231). Dissatisfied with Vince's response, Kris presses him further, "I'll make it simpler. Do you identify more as Asian American or Fil-Am?" (231). The question of identification is posed from the vantage of native to foreigner. Its purpose is twofold. On the one hand, Kris as host offers her guest two subjectivities that are *knowable* within an always already existing national imaginary—a service to her own desire to recognize Vince, as well as her audience's. On the other hand, Vince as guest is asked to oblige his host but chafes at the disciplinary nature of such identification. For Vince, the consideration of the Philippines as home is both a no and a yes. His answer of "Neither" deviates Kris' either-or and forces her to follow up, "Then what?" (231). "Filipino," he answers (231).

"Cannot be," Kris retorts (231). The impossibility of Vince's Filipino identification for Kris speaks to the limits of a dominant nationalism, one that refuses to recognize itself in the face of its diasporic Other. Vince's Filipino cultural understanding is put to the test immediately with criteria for belonging including questions of home address (lives in Hawaii), language (doesn't speak Tagalog, but understands it), and citizenship (carries a US passport, won't renounce country) (231-32). His answers negate his participation in the communal space of Filipino, outlined and fortified by Kris Aquino—the first-daughter and Oprah Winfrey of the Philippines. Indeed, despite her



own three-year exile to Boston, Aquino wields her essentialist perspective as matter of opinion. She marks oversea workers “our heroes” because they “monthly money remittances to their families,” but those who choose to start a new family and new life elsewhere, “brain-drainers” and “blank-blank-blankholes” (233). In short, the national imaginary extends to those whose paychecks subtend the Philippines’ cultural, political and material economy. Vince’s turn to the role of challenger interrogates Aquino’s definition of Filipino: “Yes, but don’t their assholes remain Filipino? Once a Filipino asshole, always a Filipino asshole, right? Isn’t your definition... too narrow, too specific, too literal?” (233). “Of course, otherwise it wouldn’t be a definition, right?” she counters. Vince’s final words in the interview is a nod to and riff of Carlos Bulosan’s canonical text *America Is in the Heart*, moving the argument from the practical to the figurative: “I thought once a Filipino in the heart, always a Filipino in the heart” (233). Rather than confront and engage Vince’s provocation, Aquino punts it to her audience:

I don’t know. Let’s ask our viewers? What do you think? Once a Filipino, always a Filipino ba? (*Camera closes in on Vince.*) Does Vince have to live in the Philippines to be a true-blooded Pinoy? Must he give up his first-world privileges, U.S. citizenship, American slang? What does it take to be a true Filipino, anyway? Can you ever become one? Send your comments to *PM Talking with Yours Truly...* (233)

I argue the failure to resolve the question of Vince’s claim to Filipino to be an example of translation in the political and ideological sense described by Vincente L. Rafael. According to Rafael, “translation in colonial contexts (but no doubt in all other social situations) is predicated on dominant signifying conventions at home that are

believed to extend abroad... As a practical act that arises from the contingent and fluid encounter with different languages and their speakers, the work of translation tends to exceed, if not undercut, dominant assumptions about the proper exchange of meanings and the transport of intentions” (“Reorientations” 336-37). Although both converse in English, there is a constant mediation of signs, intentions, and meanings that are typical in an imperial context. Vince’s claim to Filipino does not meet Aquino’s definition, but rather “puts in crisis the interpretation and meaning as well as the authority of the original and its author” (Rafael, “Reorientations” 337). There is indeed an irony at play when reading the exchange through this lens. “What it takes to be a true Filipino,” according to Aquino (the carbon copy of Oprah Winfrey), bears an uncanny resemblance to US colonial strategies in the Philippines. The colonization rhetoric is turned on its head when spoken by Kris, a postcolonial nationalist. Or perhaps its repurposed in order to reduce “the foreign to the familiar, establishing the rule of the original over its copies, of the singular Word of those above over the varied, multiple words of those below” (Rafael, “Reorientations” 337).

Vince’s invitation to be a guest on *PM Talking with Yours Truly* was certainly not meant to take this identity-politics turn. Ostensibly, Vince is positioned to be Aquino’s, and in the figurative sense, the Philippines’, arm-candy of modernity. In fact, his introduction to a wide-reaching Filipino audience stresses this claim:

My next guest is super guapo, as in super kilig me to death, and, judging by his looks, super smart. He escorted me last Friday at the annual Santacruzán gala in Malate. His name is Vicente De Los Reyes, but he prefers to be called Vince. (*She reads the teleprompter as if hypnotized.*) He was born in the town proper of San

Vicente, Philippines, and moved to Hawaii in 1978. He completed his bachelor's degree at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where he graduated with highest honors. Please give a warm round of applause and a-lo-ha! to Vince De Los Reyes. (223-24)

Here, Vince is packaged as desirable social totality: good looking, educated, of but not in the Philippines, in but not of the US. He is familiar and exotic, made manifest in his mestizo features. He and Kris Aquino, arm-in-arm at the Santacruzán and together again on her talk show fashion a fantasy union—one that satisfies the impulse to raise the profile of the Philippines in the eyes of the (globalized) Global North. Of course, Kris is keenly aware that the undoing of this national fantasy/courtship is precisely its impossibility. That is, Kris knows that Vince is gay. When Bino introduces Kris to Vince at the Santacruzán, Kris exclaims, “Oh, my god. It should be I who is the lucky one. Guwapo si Vince; may dating siya. Last year's titleholder was not even half a head turner. Plus he was not a straight-acting gay... This must be my lucky year tagala. First, a blockbuster film, *In the Name of Shame*, and now, a cutie-pie from *Hawaii Five-O* as my escort. I'm so blessed talaga.”

In each of these four episodes Linmark makes a considerable effort to stage nationalism for public consumption. For Vince, national identity has been something to perform, contest, and exploit. I have tried to denote in these readings the ways in which Filipino nationalism produces rubrics of value congruent to its former colonizer, the United States. The assent to U.S. military occupation in the Philippines under the Philippines-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty, signed August 30, 1951, has, in part, secured

the reproduction of this value system. The treaty formalizes a union under the desire for security. Indeed, desire is the refrain of its preamble:

... their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all Governments, and desiring to strengthen the fabric of peace in the Pacific Area,

...

Desiring to declare publicly and formally their sense of unity and their common determination to defend themselves against external armed attack, so that no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone in the Pacific Area,

Desiring further to strengthen their present efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security pending the development of a more comprehensive system of regional security in the Pacific Area, ...

The Mutual Defense Treaty makes peace intelligible only through a strong military. It positions occupation as benevolent and necessary to ward off perceived threats within the Pacific Area. It effectively gaslights any previous history of colonial violence, including the fact that these countries were at war with each other from 1899-1902. Instead, the treaty “Recall[s] with mutual pride the historic relationship which brought their two peoples together in a common bond of sympathy and mutual ideals to fight side-by-side against imperialist aggression during the last war” (WWII). In other words, the Japanese become the face of “imperialist aggression” despite occupying the Philippines for three years (compared to the United States’ official 34 years). It would seem impossible to square the desire for one’s former colonizer having just emerged from another. What “common bond of sympathy and mutual ideals” could the U.S. and the Philippines share?

A side-by-side fight against imperialism is ironic to be sure, yet in *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* Vicente L. Rafael writes that, “The tragic—and therefore ironic—relationship between revolution and counterrevolution forms one of the most enduring motifs in Philippine history ... Utopic longings for freedom also betrayed a generalized wish for an order of perfect reciprocity ruled over by a benevolent patron” (12). Colonial amnesia sanctions the neocolonialism of the Philippines by the United States in the name of militarization.

A form of imperial nostalgia has more recently been routed through the so-called war on terror. Consolidating multinational military alliances, the US-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq illuminate how “imperialist militarization is sustained through the normalization of militarized subjectivities and desires” (Shigematsu and Camacho xxv). Allan Punzalan Isaac recounts George W. Bush’s 2003 visit to Manila as one such instance: “Speaking before a joint session of the Philippine Congress, Bush described the U.S. role in Iraq as a liberatory project similar to that undertaken in the Philippines a century earlier in the Spanish-American War. U.S. soldiers alongside Filipinos fought to overthrow the tyranny of Spanish colonizers, he asserted” (179). Despite having the full support of Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, his statement was met with silent walkouts within the Congress, and the burning of US flags and Bush effigies outside of it: “Bush returned to a site of U.S. imperialism to establish similarities between the two imperial wars through an infuriating disavowal of historical facts,” Isaac writes (180). Language in both the Bush statement and the Mutual Defense Treaty position the US and the Philippines in a lateral alliance that obfuscates the actual vertical relationship where US militarization behaves as an

extension of colonialism. The point is recapitulated in 2011 with the signing of the Manila Declaration on board the USS Fitzgerald in Manila Bay. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario commemorated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mutual Defense Treaty by reaffirming the treaty as “the foundation of our relationship for the next 60 years and beyond.” In this document, the dead bear witness to the “profound and enduring bonds,” as Clinton hails the “many Filipinos who bravely served side-by-side with American servicemen and women during World War II and the veterans of our two nations buried at the Manila American Cemetery in Fort Bonifacio...” The optics of this declaration being signed on a US naval destroyer in Manila Bay ten years after the September-11 terrorist attacks in the US, 60 years after the Mutual Defense Treaty, and about 110 years after the start of American colonialism in the Philippines, it seems their commitment to each other cannot be overstated.

I recall the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 and the Manila Declaration (of 2011), both coming before and after *Rolling the R's* and *Leche*, in order to substantiate my claim that Filipino nationalism is a grotesque farce in Linmark's second novel. Here, Filipino nationalists depend on Vince to be their American counterpart as a way of verifying their modernity. That bond is contingent upon a US military presence in the Philippines, making Filipino independence illusory. According to Rafael, “The double connotations of freedom are, of course, directly related to the complexities of nationalism's history. As the chief means for undoing colonialisms effects, nationalism is inextricably linked to that which it seeks to repudiate. Attempting to exorcise the ghosts of colonialism, nationalism also marks the point where colonialism

returns” (13). Indeed, an anxious reliance on US militarism is at the heart of Bino Boca’s joke (cross-dressed as President Aquino) to Kris Aquino, dressed as Wonder Woman to signify a “pro-U.S. military base stand,” “Just pray the volcano doesn’t erupt. Otherwise all that ass-kissing will amount to a heap of ash” (95).

Mount Pinatubo does erupt a month later, causing American military members at Clark Air Base to evacuate. And on September 16, the Philippine Senate voted 12 to 11 to reject a treaty for continued US military occupation of the Subic Bay Naval Station and “to end American militarism in the country that has lasted nearly a century” (Shenon “Philippine” A1). Senator Agapito Aquino, brother-in-law of the President and younger brother of her slain husband and anti-Marcos revolutionary Benigno S. Aquino, calls the decision “the dawn of our nation’s birth ... It is a vote for a truly sovereign and independent Philippine nation ... It is a vote to end a political adolescence tied to the purse strings of America—a crippling dependence” (Shenon “Philippine” A1). Senator Aquino articulates the neocolonial situation that has prevented the Philippines from being truly sovereign. He lifts the veil of “freedom” and “independence,” and shows us the purse strings are tied to foreign power. Tragically, the vote which signifies a truly hopeful and politically revolutionary moment, “the dawn of our nation’s birth,” becomes no more than a footnote. President Aquino calls for a referendum under the Philippine Constitution that would extend the deadline for American departure for what turns out to be indefinitely. Drawing from her successful ousting of Ferdinand Marcos, Aquino invokes “people power”: “Once again people power is being called upon... As in 1986, we seek the direct expression of the sovereign will of the Filipino people. Now, as in the past, every one of us must participate in an exercise that gives added substance to the

democracy we have established” (Shenon “Philippine” A1, A6). Competing perceptions of “sovereign” are apparent in the statements by Senator Aquino and President Aquino. In the end, American military troops have remained a presence in the Philippines with “fairly liberal access to military installations” despite the Senate vote (Shenon “U.S.” 2). Vicente L. Rafael writes that a narrative about “the story of the struggle against colonial bondage leading to national sovereignty... grows out of and serves to consolidate the triumphalist official nationalism that has emerged in the wake of the 1986 People Power Revolt (another stunted revolution) under the Aquino, Ramos, and Estrada regimes of the late 1980s and 1990s” (3). This nationalist narrative satisfies developmentalist desire that manifests in a modernity on par with the rest of the globalized North, most notably its “side-by-side” alliance with the United States.

Said another way, the Philippines fails to ever become a truly sovereign nation precisely because it has opted-in on a rubric of militarized masculinity embodied in American ideology and working through developmentalism. Yet, it considers itself as its most modern self when it mimics its former colonizer. Likewise, Vince registers a simulation of this narrative having to flee Marcos’ martial law in the Philippines and growing into his adult self as an openly gay Filipino American. His return to the Philippines in the role of a tourist takes on yet more irony when we consider the Dumpit’s definition of balikbayan at the beginning of *Leche* and this chapter—to bear witness to the country’s modernity as a result of Marcos’ martial law. In *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai’i and the Philippines*, Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez declares Marcos as “Modernization’s foremost proponent in the Philippines... Granting himself the title ‘Master Architect and Builder of the Nation,’ the savvy and



charismatic leader undertook infrastructure development with the blessings of the United States and international banks” (49). Tourism guaranteed return on investment of this infrastructure overhaul. Specifically, the project of building roads facilitated the double benefit of granting and encouraging the flow of visitors to and from tourism zones, while also yielding a path to surveilling and suppressing opposition regimes that were marked as “backward” and “unruly”—critical work of imperialist modernity (Gonzalez 49-50). Once an exile, now a tourist, Vince quickly ascends to elite status in the Philippines precisely because both were pacified, disciplined, and managed under the same rubric of militarized masculinity.

Through my readings so far, desire has been mediated primarily from the vantage of a Filipino nationalist. That is, a desire to produce Vince as American in a way that fulfills the promise of modernity in their nationalist narrative. If we change the vantage to *Leche*'s protagonist, we'll find that Vince has always been a good candidate to actualize this desire. Vince developed his first childhood crush from reading Tagalog komics. His favorite komic, “Stories of the Unexpected” featured the bangungut disguised as a nomad by day. Bangungut is a Filipino superstition in which men die in their sleep by having a nightmare where the bangungut chokes them to death. It usually preyed on “crooks and greedy men” like Mr. Smith, “an American businessman who ran an illegal logging business on the island of Leyte, where much of the virgin forest had been destroyed” (20). The blue-eyed womanizer bad guy became an obsession of Vince's, including dreams in which Mr. Smith proposes to him on one knee during a sunset stroll on Manila Bay: “‘Yes,’ Vince said right away and threw his arms around Mr. Smith's waist. Mr. Smith knelt down to kiss Vince, who had already closed his eyes. As he rolled his tongue

inside Vince's mouth, Vince began imagining a sprawling mansion, a beachfront honeymoon resort, babies with slanted blue eyes and black hair" (21). Oddly enough, this dream escalates to a nightmare with Mr. Smith's tongue becoming a python slithering down Vince's throat. The strength of Vince's attraction to Mr. Smith supersedes the destruction his logging business is causing to forests in the Philippines. Rather than take the moral of the comic, clearly marking American business and development in the Philippines and enemy, Vince's desires domestication: marriage, a luxurious honeymoon, a mansion, mestizo babies. In *Rolling the R's*, Vicente (Vince) has a crush on Stephen Bean, a white boy who Edgar and Katrina call a "haole" and Florante recalls was named Christopher Columbus on Columbus Day. The Bean family lives behind a gated home, and his father requests a district exemption that would allow Stephen to be placed in a different, less ethnically diverse school. Back to *Leche*, an adult Vince lusts after his driver, Dante, who is married and has three children. In Dante's cab, Vince's eyes move from the tattoo of a cockfight on the driver's arm to his earlobe, to "his nape, his brawny shoulders, his hairless arms, and lingers at his finger circling the can of Coke in the console" (72). Vince's voyeurism wanders into a daydream: "O.K., say he drives me home, and then what? Then we fuck the night away. He goes home. Finis. Kaput. Tapos. What if he returns for an encore? Even better... So what if Dante turns out to be an extortionist, or worse, a serial killer? At least I got laid before getting chopped" (80, 81). Jonas, a tour guide at the Old Walled City of Intramuros, one more of Vince's crushes. He is one of three on the tour: "The Japanese couple's interest in the tour is ostensibly to educate themselves about the atrocities the Japanese Imperial Army perpetrated against the Filipinos. Vince's reason: Jonas is the cute guy he locked gazes with at the sidewalk

café where he was venting his third-world frustrations on turn-of-the-century and Philippine wildlife postcards” (242). Vince makes it furthest with Jonas, who is bisexual, sharing a meal with him and making an agreement to meet up at the club *Leche* that evening. The common thread among all of Vince’s desiring subjects is their masculinity, of the sort that’s just out of reach. In sum, Vince’s tour, through the embrace by the Filipino elite and his cruising for sex with straight, or “straight acting” men, marks him as an emergent figure: the global gay elite.

As such, Vince’s homonormativity underpins militarized masculinity ideology and signals a globalized gay model minority. He is a precursor to what Bobby Benedicto calls an “imagined gay globality,” defined as “a spatial imagination founded on claims and hegemonic representations driven by the market and sustained by a networking of (urban) scenes that separately, though similarly, depend on the erasure of othered gay men, both in Manila and in those cities read as epicenters of the gay globe” (319). The prime subjectivity for erasure in the “Bright Lights” scene of gay Manilla is the bakla, a “sexual tradition that conflates homosexuality, transvestism or effeminacy, and lower-class status” (Benedicto 318). When compared to its sister text, *Rolling the R’s*, the absence of the bakla, or sissy, in *Leche* is emphatic. And yet, even when this bakla subjectivity is jettisoned for gayness (as opposed to queerness), its specter haunts the text. In the final turn of this chapter, I’ll read key figures who represent kabaklaan (bakla-ness), often to the disinterest or misrecognition of Vince.

Bino Boca is the first queer figure Vince encounters in the Philippines. Through film, Boca is able to make political critique disguised as entertainment: “nothing in my movies is made up ... That’s what makes this turd world of ours great. I don’t need to

stretch my imagination because imagination stretches out to me” (92). For instance, when Imelda Marcos’ Film Center was being rushed through construction to meet her date for the Manilla International Film Festival, Boca was the only person allowed to film the carnage that occurred when scaffolding collapsed on over 170 workers. He shot “close-ups of victims crying out for help, moaning in pain, pleading for an instant death; of nuns, priests, and bystanders holding a vigil outside the construction site; of Sister Marie leading a prayer. Also included was a ten-minute clip of the anti-Marcos filmmaker interviewing a young man buried up to his torso in cement” (76). The Marcoses banned the documentary, but it managed to show at international film festivals and became the second-most bootlegged film in the Philippines (76). This more direct critique offers up the Marcos’ developmentalist ambition and desire for international recognition as lethal to Filipino workers. Although he seems a close friend of Kris Aquino—she calls him Tito Bino—critique can be found in the roles he casts her in. Case in point, Kris earns the title “Massacre Queen of Philippine Cinema” after she is “abducted by the Ativan Gang, raped, then hacked into pieces and thrown into Manila Bay” in Boca’s film *God, Help Us: The Magdalena Ortiz Tragedy* (97). His current film, *In the Name of Shame*, focuses on comfort stations utilized by the Japanese Imperial Army when they occupied the Philippines during WWII. The film reenacts the rapes of these comfort women (“Lolas”), who were very young, and utilizes interviews from the real Lolas. It also teams up Kris and Sister Marie who together with the Lolas travel to Japan to demand recognition of their war crimes and an apology to the Lolas. Sister Marie also demands that these atrocities be documented in Japanese textbooks.

Vince encounters the themes of the film firsthand in two ways. First, during Jonas' guided tour of the Old Walled City of Intramuros, Masa, one of the Japanese tourists drops to his knees and begs Jonas for forgiveness: "Please, forgive me... I very ashamed to be Japanese. I herp destroy your country" (245). The location was once a prison for Filipino and American soldiers during the Japanese occupation. Jonas explains that war brings out the evil in people, a line that Vince recognizes from *In the Name of Shame*. Masa elaborates that he made a comfort woman "mine," but did marry here because they fell in love (246). When the war ended, his wife jumped in the river near this spot because, Reiko explains, "She kirred herserf because she said Phirippines good under Japan. Japan give Firipinos independence. But after war, when Japan rost war, she said Pirippines under U.S. forever" (246). While this act of atonement plays out, Vince "looks at the dungeon walls, the supporting characters, the bad lighting. Am I in a Bino Boca sequel?" he wonders (246). Similarly, when getting a tour of the club Leche, Vince recognizes the space and asks if the Boca's movie was filmed here, "For four months" (281). Leche was once a former headquarters for the Japanese Imperial Army, and in the film the real life Lolas pointed out the cubicles where they lived for three years. "I must've been so painful for the Lolas ... to be brough back here and reminded of their fears, the torture, the rape," Vince says to Tita G., who responds: "Of course... It happens to anyone who has to confront an unwanted past" (281). To Vince's mind, "Boca has achieved nothing except to exploit the Lola's ordeal, cheapen their suffering, capitalize on their sorrows by turning their victimization into a two-hour melodrama starring the Massacre Queen of Philippine cinema" (281-82). Tita G. explains Bino's rationalization for is craft: "Bino said the only way he could capture the nightmarish account of the

comfort women was to film it exactly where the violation was committed...He said it was the only way he could come closest to recording the factual events; otherwise, he had no business messing with history. He called it ‘reciprocating memory’” (281). Vince is either indifferent to or misrecognizes Bino’s political and cultural critiques evident in his films, chalking them up as merely B-movies. He dismisses a sexual connection with Bino as well, when following the Santacruzans, he rejects Boca’s offer to take him home after a visit to Leche.

The club Leche is a heterotopic space where anything goes. Tita G., Vince’s cross-dressing guide through the space, explains:

Ay, naku, hijo, you can’t trust anybody nowadays. The only one you can trust is Leche. Because if there is one cardinal rule Leche preaches, it is confidentiality. Leche is the gatekeeper of secrets, and Yermaphrodite is the three-headed dog. And because two-thirds of the country is in the closet—or what they think is the closet—Leche will never go out of business. Why do you think the very popular and powerful come here? Why do you think everyone who wants to be someone flocks here? To share and spill secrets. So, I hope that before you leave tonight, Vicente, you will have shared and spilled secrets with one, if not many. (273)

Aside from being the filming location for *In the Name of Shame*, Vince learns that Leche is not only a sex club, it’s also a museum on Thursdays from 10 a.m.—2 p.m. In fact, Tita G. opens the door to a turn of the century colonial era classroom, with a chalkboard and rows of desks and benches, alphabet charts, flash cards, grammar and lesson plans, and other visual aids in Spanish, English and Japanese (274). Tita G. hands Vince *The First Philippine Reader*, and tells him how a professor from Wisconsin who came to buy

the entire library for five thousand pesos. Tita G.'s response was, "I wasn't born yesterday. I've been to London, to New York. I know about Christie's and Sotheby's. Excuse me lang. Go pillage somebody else's history. Mine is already on reserve. Leche!" (275). The book, and others, were from Imelda Marco's personal library. It came to Leche by way of a middleman, but was looted from the palace when the Marcoses fled to Hawaii. This space, originally in the 1870s by wives of Spanish government officials began as milk distribution center for young, poor Filipino mothers, then converted into an orphanage for children whose parents were killed in the Philippine-American War, then a Japanese Imperial Army headquarters and comfort station, and finally living quarters for Marcos' mistresses. It came to be a sex club at night when President Aquino had to sell off government property after the Marcos' left the treasury near empty (274-286). Leche's duality as a sex club and museum merge to make one queer archive, with Tita G. its curator. Like Bino, she's sees her role as observing, facilitating, and bearing witness to the past and present. She keeps watch over history that can't be bought or maneuvered to fit any narrative other than its own heterogeneous reality.

In fact, Leche seems almost to transform Vince in interesting ways. He signs his membership agreement with his birth name, Vicente. He's startled by his mistake when Tita G. compliments the name, but decides not to correct it to Vince. Then, when leaving the club after Jonas never shows up, Vince unleashes his first Tagalog words in years when haggling a cabbie:

'I-metro mo.' It catches him off guard: the grin of the *i* followed by the fold of the *m*, then the trill of the *r*, and finally, the half-opened *mo*. It rolled out so effortlessly, so naturally, with the accent and the intonation in the right

place... The last time he spoke it was in elementary school, just months after he arrived in Hawaii... But now, after all these years, the mother tongue that's been silenced by years of assimilation and school-enforced laws is waking up, waiting for him to transform a simple phrase into music. (296)

Vince had made a decision when he moved to avoid the heavy accents and Pidgin-English vernacular of his friends because they were associated with the plantation camps and thus only led to dismal futures (296). The slippage back to his mother tongue constitutes the specter of the “pre-modern” self, a natural impulse and queer moment. Roderick A. Fergusson writes, “The time of the Bakla and the time of the sissies run counter to the time of modern homosexuality” (193). Modern homosexuality, he argues, “enforces gender, regional, and racial uniformity” in such a way that it “must do so against the gender, regional and racial heterogeneity suggested by those ‘backward’ and primitive formations like the Bakla and the sissy (193). Has his visit to Leche undone thirteen years of assimilative work begun the moment the custom’s officer made a stink about his dried fish? No, it doesn’t. In *Global Divas*, Manalansan’s ethnographic work with gay Filipino immigrants in New York indicates “Filipino immigrant gay men are not passively assimilating into a mature or self-realized state of gay modernity, but rather are contesting the boundaries of gay identity and rearticulating its modern contours” (x). Vince recognizes the pleasure he feels when he employed the phrase in Tagalog, or, I’d argue the pleasure of shorting modernity and falling into queer failure just for a moment.

I close with one last moment that Vince must yield the strictures of modernity to quite literally exercise a ghost. Throughout the novel, Vince awakes violently from sleep after having dreams in which he encounters the bangungut. He pays it little mind,



however, believing it to be superstitious folklore (a pre-modern concern). We might consider, then, that *bangungut* to be, like the *bakla*, a haunting presence. Taking the advice from two figures who I read as iterations of the feminine, Vince makes the journey to his ancestral home in San Vicente. Sister Marie, a co-star in *In the Name of Shame*, but also an ex-communicated radical nun who became the symbol of peaceful revolution in 1986, as well as an anti-war activist, speaking out on gender oppression, graft and corruption in government, poverty and capital punishment (99), tells Vince on Kris Aquino's talk show, "I believe there's a deeper reason you're back here hijo... Fate, Vince, and fate is God's mysterious way of telling us we don't have control of our lives... Vince, you were meant to come back. Whether you wanted to or not, you had to come home. And it had to be now" (230-231). Later, after another nightmare in which encounters his grandfather, Lolo Alfonso, Vince is startled awake by the housekeeper Burnadette. Explaining to Vince that he was "trapped in his sleep," Burnadette tells Vince that *bangungut* killed her brother: "His soul did not return on time" (305). Slowly coming around to an inevitable decision, Vince asks her if she thinks his grandfather is haunting him. "Oh no, *surr*. I don't think so... I think he's been watching over you all these years. And now that you're here—you must honor him, show him your gratitude. You owe it to him, *Surr* Vince. He's waiting for you in San Vicente. Go so you can finally bury him" (314). Despite being his grandfather's favorite, their bond cemented through the joys of reading silently together, Vince was the only one in his family to opt out of returning for his funeral. The novel closes on his return to San Vicente. He desires closure, a way to shore up his narrative, and free himself of the specter of the past. Just before entering he encounters Doña Martinez, a widow clad in black: "*It's Death*

*marching to greet me,”* Vince reckons, *“To punish me for all these years of not returning. To guide me to a deeper hell, the way Virgil guided Dante to hell nine times over”* (351). One last encounter with the old world, a brush with a ghost, Doña Martinez tells Vince, “You and your brother and sister, you three, but especially you, Vicente, you were his life... There’s nothing in there for you anymore, Vicente... Forgive him, hijo. That’s all you can do. Forgive him, because he did it for your sake” (352-53). Doña Martinez articulates a humbling sacrifice made by Lolo Alfonso. It’s Vince, walking into an empty house, who struggles to make sense of it. He wants to salvage the Spanish colonial chair, the pictures on the wall, any memorabilia, but it’s all gone. The ambiguous ending of Linmark’s novel raises questions about the desire for militarized masculinity in the postcolonial moment. Rafael writes, “In an era marked by diaspora, nationalism has ... functioned to reify identities, freeze the past, and encourage the modification of ethnicity that situates Filipinos abroad in a touristic—that is to say, neocolonial—relationship with the Filipinos at home” (14). This chapter has argued that nationalisms are emboldened by militarization and the logic of security, but also that they are vulnerable to queer critique when read from the epistemological position of a sissy figure (or Bakla). In *Leche*, a chasm grew in the 13 years Vince has lived outside the Philippines. He left an exile of martial law and returns as a global gay elite. The trajectory serves hegemony in all its disciplinary, hetero- and homonormative, and unimaginative forms. It’s a route assures the failure of queerness to be resistance.

#### **Chapter IV: Seeking Out Strangeness: Imperial Feminism and Queer Futurity in *Homebody/Kabul***

The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control. Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us.

-Laura Bush, Radio Address by Mrs. Bush

November 17, 2001

Great historical crimes reproduce themselves. One injustice breeds new generations of injustice. Suffering rolls on down through the years, becomes a bleak patrimony, the only inheritance for the disinherited, the key to history, the only certain meaning of life.

-Tony Kushner, An Afterword, *Homebody/Kabul*

April 11, 2002

In his afterward to *Homebody/Kabul*, Tony Kushner says one of the themes of this play is “knowledge and learning through seeking out strangeness” (142). It’s almost a clichéd in explanation, yet to experience the play in the theater or to read it in solitude is to fulfill this promise. The title itself is strange, two unlikely subjects rubbed against one another: Homebody and Kabul. The former is an unthreatening subject living in a fortress of solitude of her making, the latter a city of ruins and political hotbed of terrorist organizations. The two terms are not equal, but the promise of the play is that the audience will come to a better understanding of their relationship to each other in the rub, the interaction of the two. The other terms in my title for this chapter, “imperial feminism” and “queer futurity,” are strange bedfellows too. By now, Western feminist thought has taken many approaches toward the equality of the sexes and dismantling sexist infrastructures in commerce and culture, but would any of these feminist approaches admit they’re doing the work of empire, specifically US imperialism?

Likewise, queer theory, in attending to the practical theoretical and material conditions of the LGBT community, would be hard pressed to accept a statement like “Queerness is not yet here” (Muñoz 1). Such a statement rubs against the ethics of queer theory laid out in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, in which the refusal of reproduction, and thus futurity, is the refusal of the mainstream social and political order. I’d like to use the two terms “imperial feminism” and “queer futurity” in relation to key terms in this dissertation. By imperial feminism I mean women’s rights under the logic of Western modernity which uses the subject of Third World women who desire liberation and require the aid of the West to fulfill this desire. Third World women’s liberation then becomes enfolded into the rubric of militarized masculinity in the service of US empire. Queer futurity, as conceived of by José Esteban Muñoz and put to work through political theater by Tony Kushner, is a way to critique the former term, imperial feminism, from the epistemological position of a sissy subjectivity. Queer futurity demands seeking out Otherness in order to fully realize one’s relationship with it and to imagine, together, alternatives to our historical pattern of crime. It’s the reason I place these two epigraphs together, to have a conversation that offers up strangeness as a possibility for new meanings in life.

As part of a governmental project of drumming up support for a military invasion in Afghanistan in response to the al-Qaida-led terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington DC on September 11, 2001, then-First Lady Laura Bush was put to work in a unique way. She delivered the weekly presidential broadcast solo for the first time, and her subject was the state of Afghan women and children. She described the miserable conditions women and children live in under the Taliban regime there, including

malnourishment, high child mortality rates, and denial of healthcare, and called for her country's support for the "world-wide effort" to end this brutality. The emphasis on human rights in the broadcast ties this particular emancipatory project to military action in familiar ways: not only does her call-to-action draw on the sentiment of hearts breaking; it also signals a threat to the "rest of us" that such deliberate human cruelty is a reality terrorists wish to impose on the rest of the world. The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor released a statement on the Taliban's "War Against Women" in conjunction with Mrs. Bush's broadcast to elaborate on the condition of women and children in Afghanistan. Both the broadcast and the statement link the US-led war on terrorism to "a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Bush).

The information disseminated by Mrs. Bush and the State Department gives witness to the recruitment of feminism into military interventionist strategy. Bush and the State Department work together to invite all "civilized people" to join and support their campaign. That the First Lady be the voice calling on the nation for support is necessary for a few reasons. One is that it's an unfamiliar role for her to carry out. Laura Bush, unlike the policy-minded Hillary Clinton, made the role of First Lady more traditional and apolitical. The country had known her best as a former librarian who enjoyed reading to children, rather than as a viable figure to the administration in major foreign policy strategy. But that is precisely why the tactic is strong; her appeal to militarism is thus more palatable to a mass audience. Second, her message is dependent upon binaries that seem reasonable to listeners. She declares the world is made up of those who cry out in "horror" at unjust violence to women and children, and those who inflict such violence. As part of the civilized world, we are bound to act on our principles, and in this case, that

action is fashioned as military intervention. She offers no alternatives to this action, no diplomacy for instance. Thus, by default, inaction or other alternative action is deemed as deviant and suspicious. And third, her appeal not only creates a humanitarian/moral dilemma, but it also brings the nation's masculinity into crisis. Having been brought to its knees by attacks on its beacons of power—commerce and intelligence—by Al-Qaida, the US was ripe to avenge itself. Predictably, the administration's reaction was to retaliate quickly and forcibly, but what I want to draw attention to is the use of feminist politics as a major part of this venture. At an unprecedented moment when the nation is in its most vulnerable state, it recruits a woman's voice and women's issues for a mission of re-masculinization. Here the ideology of militarized masculinity becomes manifest. The nation's needs to secure its borders and its people through state-sanctioned, legitimized violence supersede the work of introspection and mourning, as scholars such as Judith Butler urged the nation to do following 9/11. The rhetoric about women's liberation here works in the mode of militarized masculinity to shore up assent for war at home and abroad in response to the terrorist attacks in the US. The narrative Mrs. Bush delivers is a colonial one, where Third World women become the objects of the Western gaze. Indeed, the gift of freedom here has shades of Gayatri Spivak's influential argument that the abolition of the Hindu rite of sati in India by the British has generally been understood as a case of "White men saving brown women from brown men" (297), although in this case a woman ventriloquizes the old colonial narrative. This colonial discourse, in its new iteration of saving the women and children of Afghanistan, works precisely because its bottom line creates a hetero-panic. Dissent against military intervention in Afghanistan is aligned with the threat of not being "manly" enough to fight for the freedoms of

oppressed (brown) women and children. Rather than engage culturally specific ways of aiding women and children in Afghanistan, Bush's alibi for violence encourages military action as the only means to stop "those who seek to intimidate and control."

Tony Kushner's drama *Homebody/Kabul*, written after the 1998 US bombings of suspected Taliban training facilities in Afghanistan, was produced at the New York Theater Workshop just months after 9/11. Reviewers marveled at the prescience of the play's topic. However Kushner assures that he "is not a psychic" (144):

If lines in *Homebody/Kabul* seem 'eerily prescient' ... we ought to consider that the information required to foresee, long before 9/11, at least the broad outline of serious trouble ahead was so abundant and easy of access that even a play-wright could avail himself of it; and we ought to wonder about the policy, so recently popular with the American right, that whole countries or regions can be cordoned off and summarily tossed out of the international community's considerations, subjected to sanction, and refused assistance by the world's powers, a policy that helped blind our government to geopolitical reality, to say nothing of ethical accountability and moral responsibility. (144-5)

Kushner's logic unravels that of Mrs. Bush's broadcast by suggesting the U.S. government is at least partially responsible for the current power structure in Afghanistan. In ensuring the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1989, the US financially and materially supported the Taliban regime. The opening epigraph asserts, I believe, the inevitability of the state of Afghanistan nearing the end of the millennium (20<sup>th</sup> Century): a country disinherited from world powers will breed injustice. He does not need tea leaves to anticipate some "great historical crime" to come—it's a temporal

certainty. I offer up his words from the afterward of *Homebody/Kabul* as an alternate frame of sense-making to Laura Bush's. The context is roughly the same, both addressing the condition of the Afghanistan in relation to the US. But Kushner is keen to situate the present by turning to the past. He ruminates on a scene he cut out of the play to bring it into tighter shape; that scene calls on the legend that Cain is buried in Kabul. In this removed scene, Cain is an extremely old man whose heart is "worn out with regretting." Kushner admits to being moved that Kabul was his resting place: "There is attached to this destroyer, this hunter, this solitary, desperate, cursed figure of ultimate barrenness, some potential for that renewal of life which is human creativity. Cain is the founder of a city as well as a fratricide, the father of the arts as well as the first person to usurp God's power of determining mortality, the first person to usurp the role of the angel of death" (148). Here, as in the epigraph, is language of suffering but also language lush in a reproductive potential that springs from tragedy. It is not a militaristic theory of history or oppression, but one that seeks to account for pain and to nurture new life.

In *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner's subject matter expands from the national crisis of HIV/AIDS in *Angels in America* to the global reality of U.S. imperialism at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Interestingly, U.S. foreign policy and events exist in the periphery of the drama. He makes women the primary agents of the play, insisting upon looking complexly at gender in Afghanistan and in the Western world. In an imaginative political exercise, he animates the domestic for politics, allowing for his opposition to and critique of war—especially war that purports to be for feminist motivations. Thus, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* is a pre-emptive anti-war play that scrambles the structure for the war by the will of women who want liberation.



The relationship between feminism and militarism is complex, and often conflicted. There is on the one hand, feminism that seeks for equality within the institution of the military. These concerns are concepts of equality—how many women are serving on a particular mission, how many have opportunity to serve on the front lines, and equal access to the recourses available to soldiers and veterans. On the other hand, feminist critics of this notion of gender equality argue such a concept works to homogenize and normalize violence, with negative material effects on women’s lives. Women serving in the military might, these critics contend, suffer as veterans who require long-term care for injuries; they might be in greater danger of sexual violence in their deployments; or of course, they might become casualties of war.

The domestic sphere has generally been theorized as a feminine space. It has also been characterized as apolitical. bell hooks explains,

By equating militarism and patriarchy, ... feminists often structure their arguments in such a way as to suggest that to be male is synonymous with strength, aggression, and the will to dominate and do violence to others and that to be female is synonymous with weakness, passivity, and the will to nourish and affirm the lives of others. While these may be stereotypical norms that many people live out, such dualistic thinking is dangerous; it is a basic ideological component of the logic that informs and promotes domination in Western society.

(59)

hooks points out the flaw in feminist assumptions, in particular the essentialist “will to nourish.” Kushner’s protagonist Homebody possesses no such impulse. In fact, withholding touch, affection, and guidance is her approach to motherhood. Neither is she

a passive observer in life. She is keenly aware of the corrosive effects capital and Western society have on the world in their current manifestation. She has a propensity to escape through books of all sorts, in several languages, and quite literally in her disappearance from a physical presence in her home in London to a ghost in the streets of Kabul.

I will give a fuller reading to the character of the Homebody shortly, but I mention her now as a way to touch down from the soaring, universal rhetoric in Bush's address. In her message, the women of Afghanistan signified pain and oppression—resonant to a US audience in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It matters little that these Afghani women remain nameless, faceless, and without description of their plight. The task of Bush's message was to redirect the nation's focus from its vulnerable grief to the active liberation of the women and children of Afghanistan. Militarized masculinity won out by never fully indulging a collective mourning for lives lost in 9/11. The task of reflection, to consider what put the events in motion, an analysis of the long history that would allow for such acts to be committed, was jettisoned for the supposed necessary task of liberating these female subjects and their children from our common enemy. But, once free, what would become of these women? What would become of their children? There are few clues in Bush's address to indicate how these women and children will live after the threat of their brown male oppressors has been eliminated, and for anti-war artists/activists like Kushner this is a big problem.

Kushner puts the First Lady Laura Bush on trial for such apparent willful ignorance in in the March 6, 2003 issue of *The Nation*. In his one-act play called "Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy," the character of Mrs. Bush is the

distinguished visitor of an audience consisting of three children in pajamas and bathrobes and an angel. Bush has been invited to read to the children, but before she begins a series of discoveries plays out between the Angel and herself. The Angel explains to her that the sound coming from the children is bird music from Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, and that they wear pajamas and bathrobes because they are dead. One child died because he drank a glass of water infested by a large intestinal parasite; it took him three excruciating days to die. The Angel explains, "In 1999, an American plane dropped a bomb filled with several tons of concrete on the power station near his village. He was already malnourished; he had been malnourished since birth, because of the sanctions. The power station that was crushed by the bomb was believed to be supplying power to a plant suspected of producing certain agents necessary for the development of biotoxins. We do not know if it did." Another of the children died in a shelter in 1991: "A smart bomb found its way down the ventilator shaft of the shelter. The smart bomb believed, mistakenly, that it had found the ventilator shaft of a factory that manufactured parts for nuclear weapons, but the bomb was mistaken. Four hundred people were incinerated at a temperature of 900 degrees Fahrenheit. It was on CNN." Bush recalls watching the event, "oh my God! I did! I saw! It was green! Phosphorus! Night footage! I *remember* that."

The detailed description of these two deaths and their link to U.S. militarism go unnoticed or ignored, by Bush, who again reverts to cliché: "Saddam Hussein is a terrible man... It isn't right that you should have had to die because your country is run by an evil man who is accumulating weapons of mass destruction. But he is, you see, he really is, everyone knows this and he will kill many, many other children all over the world if he isn't stopped. So, so it was um, *necessary* for you to die, sweetie, oh how *awful* to say

that, but it was, precious.” She further states that deaths related to sanctions were also necessary evils to “stopping him” (Hussein), and that the coming war will likely produce more innocent casualties, but that it is a “terrible sin” for which she and “Bushie” (President George W. Bush) must pay. Here, of course, the reference to Hussein moves the target of her radio address from Afghanistan to Iraq. However, Iraq was packaged together with the invasion of Afghanistan in almost identical manufactured reasoning: wouldn’t the US be so much the better having knocked out Hussein along with Osama bin Laden? Worst of all, there is no known number to these deaths:

LB: how many children have died in Iraq, you know, what with the sanctions and the bombings and all?

A: The bombings of course have never stopped; they have been continuous since the Gulf War ended. It never ended.

LB: How many children, do you know?

A: Hundreds of children. Thousands of children. 150,000 children. 400,000 children. Who’s counting? No one is counting. A lot. From diseases related to the sanctions and the power outages and the depleted uranium dust shed from the casings of American missiles? Perhaps related? Probably related? Nearly 600,000 children have died. Many, many children have died.

LB: Oh gosh. And on the bright side, all those dead children and yet look, you have maintained such a low student-teacher ratio. Three-to-one!

Bush’s reception to her question of how many children have died in Iraq quickly pivots to a positive. It hardly seems an appropriate response, and yet the Angel, who Kushner

writes as “unfailingly kind and polite,” rolls with the redirect in step: “We believe a low student-to-teacher ratio is necessary for learning.”

Beyond the lament of overcrowding as a serious concern for the current state of education in the U.S., what we have here is a moment where *learning* comes about through fantastical strangeness. An Angel and three dead Muslim children are educating Mrs. Bush about the great crimes committed by the U.S. in the Middle East, ostensibly for the betterment of their compatriots lives. The more Bush learns of these atrocities, the more her resolve is tested. Like the Homebody, Bush reveals her thoughts up to a point, perhaps even over-shares, and then quickly disappears into her reading from *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pet names like “Bushie,” the president’s early, *early* bedtime no matter the situation, the demonstration of the heavy snores he makes in his sleep (“a hideous bass snore”), and the numerous “just between us”-s reveal moments that could be endearing but instead illuminate the complacent state of mind of a man who may be responsible for the death of the audience of children before his wife.

The passage Laura Bush chooses to read from Dostoyevsky’s novel has to do with the jailing of Jesus Chris by the Grand Inquisitor for resurrecting a young girl during the Spanish Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor explains that he and his totalitarian friends offer “freedom from freedom!” to a silent Jesus Christ: “And he tells Jesus they will make a world, he and his fellow totalitarians, he and his big government buddies, where hundreds of millions of people will be happy, fed slaves—they’ll even be allowed to sin, a little, just so they feel happier being slaves.” The allusion to her husband, the president, as the Grand Inquisitor becomes more and more clear, and she chalks it up to “genius literature of the first rank.” The engagement with a truly difficult proposition causes

discomfort: “You lose track of who is who, your compass is gone all screwy, you started out knowing for sure, and you end up adrift, and the more you think on it the more the clarity of the argument sort of melts like people in 900-degree Fahrenheit heat, and all you can see anymore is pain, pain and more pain, like it’s not about ideas anymore, it’s just about raw naked SUFFERING.” The power of literature has the potential to “rattle” her until her “screws come loose, ... like... the way, when I am in a mood, I attack and scour a sooty pot.” Mrs. Bush, worked up from the reading, the thinking, and the demonstration of scouring a pot, collects herself and kisses each child on the forehead. The action mirrors the action in “The Grand Inquisitor,” as Christ kisses the Inquisitor on the lips and lets him go. The gesture of the kiss holds promise, but Dostoyevsky’s character Ivan says, “The kiss glowed in his [the Inquisitor’s] heart. But the old man adhered to his ideas.” And just as this strange encounter with an angel and three dead Iraqi children contained the potential for learning, this scene ends in a parallel way to the book:

LB: The kiss glows in my heart

But.

I adhere to my ideas.

*End of scene.*

This sequence at the end of the scene is powerful in its indictment of Mrs. Bush. She cannot shift blame to Ashcroft, or even to her husband. She becomes the Inquisitor in the allusion, her kiss with the dead children reflecting the kiss between the Inquisitor and Christ. It’s an emotional connection, a fantastical encounter, but each character ends with a willful turn from what’s been learned in that extraordinary experience to tow the line of

their fabricated “ideas.” On the one hand, the one-act lifts the veil of war in the name of liberating women and children through its stubborn allegiance to imperialism. On the other hand, this spectacular situation creates the potential for queer futurity. Kushner’s choice of Laura Bush as the primary Western figure in the play suggests that feminist thought is a good place to imagine alternatives to the pain and suffering inflicted upon innocent civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq, albeit rerouted in a less cynical and militant way. The moments where Mrs. Bush provides asides, admissions of guilt and sin alert the audience to this potential. Here and in her radio address she makes the decision to defend her husband’s policy, and in this way she becomes the embodiment of imperial feminism. But we can look to *Homebody/Kabul* to envision what queer futurity might look like, and how it relies heavily on the work of women and a transnational feminism.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz argues that the here and now has stultified the queer political imagination. In the LGBT community, anti-homophobic projects like the Human Rights Campaign have dominated the here and now by bringing marriage equality, for example, to the forefront of the nation. For Muñoz, this kind of work will not do because its success is measured in terms already legible to this world. It is an enterprise that recognizes marriage as a legitimate institution and seeks assimilation into it. Gay military service is another venture of the here and now that fails to dismantle the master’s house. *Cruising Utopia* is a provocation that announces, “Queerness is not yet here” (Muñoz 1). And the *yet* does not depend on which U.S. state has struck down its ban on gay marriage. Rather, Muñoz offers up utopia as a way to break free from the “prison house” of the here and now: “We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a

*then and there*” (1). The *we* calls upon the many who have invested in the anti-imperialist scholarship and activism that attends to issues of sexuality, race, and gender. Many may identify as queer, but Muñoz insists, “we are not yet queer” (1). Queerness, he says, “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). For Muñoz, queerness is utopia named—a futurity blueprinted in aesthetics, especially queer aesthetics.

Utopia here is a Marxist theorization primarily associated with those in the Frankfurt School. Muñoz principally turns to Ernst Bloch’s theory of utopia, exhaustively detailed in his three-volume *The Principle of Hope*, for a new “portal to another mode of queer critique that deviates from dominant practices of thought existing within queer critique today” (2). He explains that Bloch offers hope as a hermeneutic, as a way to combat the oppressive pessimism of the present’s political struggles. What possibilities emerge when hope becomes an actual critical intervention? Even in a single moment, hope as a “critical optic” (4) derives pleasure and becomes necessary to combat the here and now by glimpsing the then and there. This strategy is opposed to the antirelational thesis in queer theory championed by Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, among others. Whereas Edelman posits in *No Future* that the future is the province of the child and therefore not of the queers, Muñoz argues that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope—that queerness is always on the horizon. Fully aware that utopia is not a new or radical concept, Muñoz warns, “Antiutopianism in queer studies, which is more often than not intertwined with antirelationality, has led many scholars to an impasse wherein they cannot see futurity for the life of them” (12). To be sure, Muñoz’s critique of the antirelational thesis as a romanticization of the negative does not negate the utopian



potential of the negative. Borrowing Fredric Jameson's term anti-antiutopianism, Muñoz explains that radical negativity, like the negation of negation, "offers us a mode of understanding negativity that is starkly different from the version of the negative proposed by the queer antirelationist" (13). Here the negative becomes "both weirdly reparative" and the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism (14).

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*"The Present is always an awful place to be"*—The Homebody

As the title of the play suggests, *Homebody/Kabul* insists that connection is a means to come to understanding. Understanding the past, the recent past, and the present in order to envision a more just future. In historical context, Kushner wrote the play in 1998 when America bombed perceived Taliban camps in the Sudan and Afghanistan. The bombings killed numerous civilians, although no number has been reported with accuracy.

How might the two terms in the title be connected when they appear to be framed as incongruous? The Homebody is a middle-aged British woman, while Kabul, at the time of the play's performance, was the crumbling Afghani capital and governed by one of the West's most hostile threats. Indeed, the title seems to invoke an old East/West, Occident/Orient relationship, yet Kushner works against such a relationship right away in Act 1, Scene i, or the Homebody's monologue. "Our story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000 B.C.," she reads, the words belonging to an antiquated travel guidebook to the city of Kabul (9). And so too begins the play, "our story," drawing in the audience and creating a space for the collective participation in the learning about the city. Interest in Kabul is assumed, for the Homebody notes it as a "city which as we all

know, has...undergone change” (9). The Homeboy gestures to the present here, but then quickly retreats—she is, after all, knowingly reading from an outdated book: “this was published in 1965, and it is now 1998, so the book is a vestige superannuated by some...thirty-three years, long enough for Christ to have been born and die on the cross” (10). But her method is knowing and intentional:

My reading, my research is moth-like. Impassioned, fluttery, doomed. A subject strikes my fancy: Kabul—you will see why, that the tale I’m telling—but then, I can’t help myself, it’s almost perverse, in libraries, in secondhand bookshops, I invariably seek out not the source but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source, outdated guidebooks [...] old magazines, hysterical political treatises written by an advocate of some long-since defeated or abandoned or transmuted cause; and I find these irrelevant and irresistible, ghostly, dreamy, the knowing what was known before the more that has since become known overwhelms ... As we are, many of us, overwhelmed, and succumbing to luxury ... (9-10).

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz discusses aesthetic affect as a moment in which potentiality for the then and there occurs, the utopian function of art. I construe the Homebody’s affinity for these dated readings as having the aesthetic affect of temporal interruption. For example, Muñoz asserts that the everyday material is not just an object that represents alienated labor and consumption in a discussion of a Coke bottle in Andy Warhol’s silk screens and in Frank O’Hara’s poem, “Having a Coke with You.” He explains, “Warhol and O’Hara both detect something else in the object of a Coke bottle and in the act of drinking a Coke with someone” (9). For Warhol, drinking a Coke is a

great equalizer because “all Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it” (7). In O’Hara’s poem, sharing a Coke with a beloved is an exhilarating experience—even more so than standing before fantastic moments in the history of art: “Having a Coke with You / is even more fun than...” Thus feelings of awe, astonishment, and emotive pop art, for example, are quotidian moments of aesthetic dimension and the potentiality it represents. Muñoz explains, “Using Warhol’s musings on Coca-Cola in tandem with O’Hara’s words, I see the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening. Bloch would posit that such utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed. They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging [sic] transformation” (9).

The Homebody imbues her taste in antiquated reading and research with strong affect: impassioned, fluttery, doomed. She avoids the source of the subject directly by privileging the irrelevant. Thus, she avoids the present altogether, fearing becoming overwhelmed or succumbing to luxury. The guidebook she reads from allows her the pleasure of “knowing what was known” then and there, rather than being overwhelmed in the here and now, where “more that has since become known” (10). These objects have the aesthetic function of creating an opening, a space for her to escape the present and imagine alternatives to it. Of course, such an assessment lends itself to the charge of naiveté or even nostalgia. However, the Homebody perceives herself as someone who “never strayed so far from the unlit to the spotlight, and so should say rather that [she] live[s] with the world’s utter indifference, which [she has] always taken to be a form of

censure-in-potencia” (12). Her self-assessment hardly lives up to the promise of alternative potentialities, and yet her monologue has signified her with strangeness. It has an elliptical structure that moves between reading from the guidebook and revelatory musings on her life; the ellipsis becomes utopian performativity. At one moment she addresses the audience directly with self-awareness: “May I assume most of you will have dismissed me as a simpleton? I cannot hope to contravene your peremptory low estimation, which may for all peremptoriness nevertheless be exactly appropriate” (12). The interruption of the monologue to address the audience directly is one instance in which utopia is staged, if only for a brief moment. The Homebody calls upon the audience to make a judgment upon her character, and predicts the collective result is a “peremptory low estimation.” She makes this assumption based on present norms of manners and conversation, and in theater, the norms of the fourth wall. Her breaking of the fourth wall, although not altogether uncommon, along with her elliptical, discursive monologue, disrupts the audience’s expectations and demands that they pay close attention, for she is not reading/thinking/speaking in conventional ways. Indeed, the Homebody attributes her strangeness to her isolated status: “So my diction, my syntax, well, it’s so irritating. To listen,” she admits, “I blame it on the books, how else to explain it? My parents don’t speak like this; no one I know does; no one does. It’s an alien influence, and my borders have only ever been broached by books. Sad to say” (12-13).

Here, the Homebody articulates, that which gives her pleasure also draws up walls around her: “My husband cannot bear my ... the sound of me and has threatened to leave on this account and so I rarely speak to him anymore” (13). For her one child, Priscilla, “nothing ever seems to go well. The older she gets” (27). Her husband, Milton, blames

her for their daughter's unhappiness. Although the family did love each other once, she says, "today it simply isn't what it used to be" (27). As the familial structure deteriorates, the Homebody reiterates her love of the world, in the abstract, and her love of the guidebook (or the other aesthetic objects she names) in particular:

Its foxed unfingered pages. Forgotten words: 'Quizilbash.' Its sorrowing supercessional displacement by all that has since occurred. So lost; and also so familiar. The home (She makes the gesture) away from home. Recognizable: not how vast but how crowded the world is, consequences to everything: the Macedonians, marching east; one tribe displacing another; or one moment in which the heart strays from itself and love is ... gone? What after all is a child but the history of all that has befallen her, a succession of displacements, bloody, beautiful? How could any mother not love the world? What else is love but recognition? Love's nothing to do with happiness. Power has to do with happiness. Love has only to do with home. (27-28)

In gorgeous language, the Homebody ties together recognition, responsibility, and motherhood to history and futurity. Her tour of Afghan civilization via the guidebook brings about this purview, and it indicates her (perhaps unknowing) reluctance to participate wholly in the social construct of the family. Indeed, the realities of marriage and motherhood are anti-utopian for the Homebody. The banal ordinariness of her here and now causes resentment for the social structures that constrain her. She admonishes herself for existing "on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching others perishing in the sea, wringing her plump little maternal hands, oh, oh. Never joining the drowning" (28). Such is the predicament of the present for Kushner's Homebody. She fails to fulfill

the domestic duties of wife and mother because she has limited communication with her husband and withholds touch from her daughter, who is “starving” for it (28).

Recent scholarship in queer studies reminds us that failure can be a resourceful tool for signaling dissent and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Therefore to say that the Homebody fails in her domestic duties is a statement and a reading that is manifest of what Muñoz calls the “straight present” (65). Her reading habits have already indicated her wish to leave the here and now for the then and there; but the Homebody also vividly expresses desire in her monologue too. That desire is to make meaningful connections with people, running counter to the solitary nature of her life. There are two examples in her monologue where this desire is revealed, and I want to frame these instances in relation to Muñoz’s call to “Take Ecstasy with Me” (185). Muñoz implores us to “vacate the here and now for a then and there,” by way of stepping out of straight time in order to invite the wave of potentiality that is queer futurity (185). Taking the drug ecstasy is one way of doing this in *Cruising Utopia*, but it is certainly not the only way. In fact, Muñoz takes the phrase from a song by the Magnetic Fields in which he hears, but more nearly feels, “A wave of lush emotions, and other meanings for the word *ecstasy* are keyed. The gender-neutral song’s address resonates queerly and performs a certain kind of longing for something else. Might it be a call for a certain kind of transcendence? Or is it in fact something more?” (185). Inspired by Muñoz’s provocation, I’m drawn to a moment in which the Homebody reveals that both she and her husband take “powerful antidepressants” (13). Each has a different prescription, but she often takes his pills instead of her own because she wants to know what he’s feeling. The act of taking her husband’s pills is transgressive and a little romantic. It expresses her desire to make

connection with him, to understand his feelings and perhaps his thinking. It is not unlike her reading practices, in which she steps out of herself and into another place and time, or person. Of course, the act of taking his pills instead of hers also rebels against a tool of normative behavior modification. The Homebody, never fully registering how her antidepressant works, believes that “this drug is a kind of talented salt. And so I imagine my brain floating in a salt bath, frosted with a rime of salt, a pickle-brine brain, pink-beige walnut-wrinkled nutmeat within a crystalliform quartzoid ice-white hoarfrost casing, a gemmy shell, gemmiparous: budding. How any of this is meant to counteract depression is more than I can say” (16). In the spirit of her experimenting with her husband’s pills, she explains that he never ingests hers, which are available to him in a “nice wide-mouthed bowl,” next to the sink: “I find his refusal to sample dull. A little dull” (13). And thus the Homebody’s not-so-furtive invitation to take ecstasy, or in this case powerful anti-depressants, with her is denied—a missed connection.

The second expression of desire for human connection in the Homebody’s monologue occurs when she is buying Afghani hats for a party she is throwing. As she purchases them, she notices the hand of the Afghan merchant, a man around her age, has had three fingers hacked off in a clean line. This encounter jolts her out of the rather mundane task of shopping and becomes a moment of ecstasy for the Homebody: “I tried, as one does, not to register shock, or morbid fascination, as one does my eyes unfocused my senses fled startled to the roof of my skull and then off into the ether like a rapid vapor indifferent to the obstacle of my cranium WHOOSH, clean slate, tabula rasa, terra incognita, where am I yet still my mind’s eye somehow continuing to record and detail that poor ruined hand slipping my Mastercard into the ... you know” (21). The

Homebody's emotional response is very much in line with Muñoz's "wave of lush emotions, and other meanings for the word ecstasy." Her high continues as she realizes that she is suddenly able to speak perfect Pushtu, and so she asks the merchant what happened to his hand. He explains that he did informant work for the Mujahideen and for the Russians. The former chopped off his three fingers when he thieved bread: "I stole bread for my starving family, I stole bread *from* a starving family, I profaned, betrayed, according to some stricture I erred and they chopped off the fingers of my hand" (25). A fantastic, intimate exchange occurs between the merchant and the Homebody here, and it is made possible through her desire to learn of his lived experience. It transcends the impersonal transaction between consumer and merchant and goes further yet. The Afghani merchant takes the rest of the afternoon off and steps out of the shop hand-in-hand with the Homebody and onto a road in Kabul. She notes some of the geography from her guidebook, but then her attention returns to the hat merchant who smells of almonds and whose face "shatters into a thousand shards" by his broad shy smile (26). Next to the grave Bibi Mahru, a destination for mothers with ailing children, the Homebody and the hat merchant make love beneath a chinar tree. "We kiss, his breath is very bitter, he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand," she describes (26). The detail is of the hand becoming whole again, healed when inside of her signals the utopic moment. In erotic fantasy, the Homebody remarks on the pleasure of feeling—the scent and sight of him, his taste. It's a shared ecstasy from the moment they leave his London store to the recuperation of his hand in the act of making love.

For Muñoz, "Take ecstasy with me thus becomes a request to stand out of time



together, to resist the stultifying temporality and time that is not ours, that is saturated with violence both visceral and emotional, a time that is not queerness. Queerness's time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is queerness's way" (187). I have elucidated two instances in which the Homebody has expressed desire to make an affective connection to another being—an expression of desire I read in relation to Muñoz's call to "Take Ecstasy with Me." The first instance is inadequate because the experience is not shared. Her experimentation with taking her husband's antidepressants goes unmatched by his refusal to get to know her feelings by swallowing hers. Unlike the sensuous description of her experience with the Afghani merchant, she is left only to describe her feelings as a brain soaking in a salt bath. The Homebody achieves ecstasy in the second instance, where her desire is matched by that of the hat merchant and consummated in a utopia of their making. "Knowing ecstasy is having a sense of timeliness's motion, comprehending a temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present)," Muñoz explains (186). Milton, the Homebody's husband, is unable or unwilling to exist out of straight time, thus denying the potentiality of ecstasy. In her fantasy, the merchant can comprehend a non-linear idea of time, and therefore he is able to encounter a queer temporality with the Homebody. The notion of taking ecstasy with me in relation to the Homebody is important in that it is not abstract, as one might believe fantasy to be, and as the audience of the play will soon learn. Her monologue closes with a report from the party, where the hats are "a brilliant success" (29). Finding pleasure in the aesthetic, she is amused that her guests frequently exchange the hats while dancing: "kaleidoscopic and self-effacing and I think perhaps to our surprise in some small way meltingly intimate, someone else's hat atop your head,

making your scalp stiffen at the imagined strangeness” (29). And it is in the seeking out of this strangeness where intimacy resides, the foreign hat that one tries on and then another and another, scalp stiffening at the thought of where it has been, the thrill of the then and there. The spirit of the scene culminates in the Homebody’s decision to disappear from the here and now.

Act 1, Scene i of the play is the only instance when the Homebody is corporeally present. Toward the end of this scene, her intention becomes clear via stage directions. As her party comes to an end, the Homebody sings along to the first two verses of Frank Sinatra’s “It’s Nice to Go Trav’ling,” while putting the guests’ hats back in the shopping bag. When she finishes singing she puts on a coat and buttons it up. Holding the guidebook in her hands, but not opening it, the Homebody tells the audience that the 17<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Sa’ib-I-Tabrizi, who in passing through Kabul in his travels, wrote a poem, “for he had been touched by its strangeness and beauty, moved only as one may be moved through an encounter with the beautiful and strange” (30). She then recites the poem, which ends, “I sing to the gardens of Kabul;/ Even Paradise is jealous of their greenery” (30).

The next scene, Act 1, Scene ii, opens in Kabul with a cast of characters that include Milton and Priscilla Ceiling, the Homebody’s husband and daughter, among natives to the city and a British expatriate called Quango Twistleton. The audience quickly learns that the family has come to collect the Homebody, but they are immediately met with news of her gruesome death. A local doctor gives a jargon-filled explanation of her death, but Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni, a Taliban minister, demonstrates more effectively what happened to her body by shredding an old newspaper: “The lady,

she have been torn apart to pieces” (33). The gesture is accompanied by the indication that the Homebody was murdered rather than having stepped on one of the land mines that are plentiful in the area: “Since last week President Clinton have bombed the people in Khost, many killed, the people are very angry against Western aggression-disregard-disrespect for Afghanistan” (33). Durranni explains that the Homebody’s attackers likely believed her to be American based on her disregard for the burqa and her wearing a Discman. He reports that her remains have been lost and that information for the purpose of recovery is scarce: “To you and your daughter, every Afghan heart laments for the mother. Death we know. Kabul is not a city for Western tourist women, we do not want them” (35).

I offer this scene summary as a way of staging what I argue to be a spoof of the imperial venture. Here, the West has come to Kabul to save the white woman from brown men, or from the East (strangeness) more generally. It is a critical undoing of that familiar imperial feminist logic that assumes the monolithic “Western woman” as an idealized subjectivity. The Homebody’s monologue does some of the unraveling, but her absconding to Kabul questions the very tenants of imperialist feminism, those of wife and mother. What is at stake in this staging is an undressing of the precarious normativity of this narrative—an old colonial one disguised as women’s liberation. In my discussion of Laura Bush’s radio address, I outlined the way in which her rhetoric was consistent with masculine-imperialist ideological formation, or militarized masculinity. Her invocation of the suffering women and children of Afghanistan made good on Spivak’s claim that “the protection of woman (today the ‘third-world woman’) becomes a signifier for the establishment of a *good* society” (298). Traditionally, imperialism’s image as establisher

of a good society relied on woman as objects of protection (Spivak 298-299); imperial feminism parrots this sentiment by pairing militarism with women's rights. The measure of success for the imperial venture is, of course, the flattening out, or mainstreaming, of woman to sustain the production narrative of the good society. Of course, Muñoz gestures to and warns against this same assimilationist (imperialist) project in *Cruising Utopia*, insisting we look to a queer futurity as interventionist strategy.

I will proceed to work through key scenes in *Homebody/Kabul* where tenets of imperial feminism collapse through the utopian function of queer futurity, "casting a picture of potentiality and possibility" (Muñoz 125). To return to Act 1, Scene ii, Milton and Priscilla are left to consider their lives without wife or mother. Milton readily accepts the information he has received, ending the scene with the lines, "Jesus Christ. I am unmarried" (42). His wife's disappearance is not altogether unexpected; he reminds Priscilla that she had warned them she was considering this. "SHE IS DEAD! *Reuters has reported it!*" (41), Milton shouts. But Priscilla is less certain, returning to the Discman and wondering, "You'd think a thing like this would be of some value, wouldn't you, on the black market? They'd have nicked it, her assailants, it's what I'd have done if I'd no money" (38). For Priscilla, her mother's remains, the Discman and guidebook, exist as ephemeral evidence. They cause her to challenge the story of her mother's death, and to suspect instead that she has been kidnapped, or "Maybe she's hiding. From us" (40). Something about these ephemera inspires Priscilla to seek out the Homebody on her own.

In his reading of "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop, Muñoz offers the idea of queer trace as a kind of ephemeral evidence. Focusing on the parentheses and italics segment in

the last line of the poem, “(Write it!),” Muñoz explains that these graphically differentiated “words evoke the idea of gesture, as gestures” (71). The parentheses and italics double the emphasis on the word “write,” a command to “save the ephemeral thing by committing it to memory, to word, to language. The poet instructs us to retain the last thing through a documentation of our loss, a retelling of our relationship to it” (71). I want to suggest that the Homebody’s Discman and the guidebook offer Priscilla a queer trace that sets into motion the rest of the play. The queer trace also marks the contrast between how she and Milton process the Homebody’s death. Milton resides in straight time, the here and now, where he accepts the news of his wife’s death without question, and because it was reported by *Reuters*. On the other hand, Priscilla engages with her mother’s remains, listening to “Come Fly with Me” on the Discman, and questioning the authority of the here and now. She retains the utopian function of hope that sustains the possibility of reunion with the Homebody. And so Priscilla leaves her father in their hotel room, and sets out into the streets of Kabul to find her mother—to “(Write it!).”

Priscilla’s initial mission to recover the Homebody is also an effort to recuperate familial order in a straight time and place. Kushner denies this effort by creating diversions and alternate possibilities that force Priscilla to encounter strangeness. In witnessing her doing so, the audience of the play is invited to unlearn roles that organize imperial feminism. The queer trace of the Homebody provides a key tool for this exercise. We can see Priscilla negotiating the ambiguity surrounding her mother as a move away from the rigid pragmatism of straight time and toward a then and there of queer futurity. After the first day of searching for her mother’s body with the help of a mahram poet called Khwaja, Priscilla remarks: “It’s as if there’s more room suddenly,

and air to breathe. Something snapped or sprung loose. I can't tell you how uncharacteristic this is. Me, trudging about. She really would be surprised. It's wicked to ... enjoy this view, I should be back in the hotel room, grieving but ... I've done that. Years of that. Still, she's ... dead" (60). Priscilla expresses her new orientation in this passage. She contrasts what she ought to be doing (grieving) with her new sense of a sense. We might say that the "something" that "snapped or sprung loose" is an opening up to queer potentialities, strange encounters. Moments after she says "she's ... dead," Priscilla counters herself, "If she was dead, there'd be her body. You can't lose a body" (60). But there remains an uneasy tension between the practical and the potential, still working itself out. As she takes in the view, she creates a metaphor that guides her toward accepting her mother's loss: "Perhaps as they moved her body from one hospital to another, perhaps at every hospital they left some piece of her. So now ... she's scattered all over Kabul. The whole city. It's her" (60). Kwaja, responds, "Anything, everything can be lost" (60). Muñoz argues, "being lost can be understood as a particularly queer mode of performing the self" (75). I read Kwaja's statement in relation to Muñoz as a particularly didactic moment in the play. Kwaja is a Tajik mahram, as already noted, but he also writes poetry in Esperanto, the universal language that is almost extinct. He is not Pashtun like the Taliban, and we come to learn that he is an informant to the Northern Alliance much later in the play. This is all to say that he occupies a precarious position in Kabul, but he acts as a kind of Virgil-figure to Priscilla as her mahram. We know the importance of language to the poet, so the audience here must consider "being lost" beyond the literal. In fact, the demand to procure the Homebody's body has a uniquely Western arrogance about it, especially when we

consider the number of unaccounted-for deaths caused by U.S. sanctions and bombings. We must consider a more hopeful reading of “Anything, everything can be lost” if we are to critique the exclusionary logics of imperial feminism.

Priscilla’s experience in her first day in Kabul allows her to reevaluate the relationship she had with her mother. As we know from the Homebody’s monologue, the family loved each other once, but that changed, possibly because of Priscilla’s suicide attempt at 18. We also know that the Homebody withheld her touch from her daughter because she believed it is the touch that corrupts. “Daughter of a dictionary, me,” Priscilla says (65). But an opening occurs in her reflection of their relationship, and it allows Priscilla new understanding: “She gave—nothing—and so she . . . demanded interpretation. She was so unyieldingly secretive, she felt if she shared anything, I’d become her. Maybe it wasn’t ever rejection, just an invitation to understand? She finally . . . *acted*. She’s made her move. D’you see?” (65). Priscilla’s new consideration of her mother is granted via the queer trace left by the guidebook and discman. These ephemera sparked her need to seek out answers on her own. Of course, Milton does not see what his daughter can: “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about” (65). He couldn’t connect to his wife or his daughter in their home, and he most certainly cannot do it in Kabul under dire circumstances. He is staunchly grounded in straight time, and attributes insanity to the condition of his wife and daughter. “Mentally ill women get Toyota-trucked to the old soccer stadium, I shouldn’t wonder,” he warns Priscilla (62). Milton can’t imagine challenging the narrative he’s been given, but Priscilla can: “I know what they said, but . . . The twilight outside, it’s . . . powdery. Everything feels close here, the air, the mountains, not crowding in but there’s . . . well, proximity. Intimacy. Perfume.

Like stepping into her clothes closet. I have this feeling” (66). Priscilla echoes her earlier sentiment that Kabul is her mother, but this time the feeling is more near, it’s intimate. The queer trace has her documenting her mother in the air and scenery, moving from the home to the open air of this strange place. The stress on *feeling* recalls the Homebody’s desire to connect with her husband, to know what he’s feeling, by taking his antidepressants. Priscilla gains confidence in the trace: “Is she dead? She isn’t dead” (66). The question gestures to a hesitation to completely accept the loss, while the statement has a confidence about it, a sureness, perhaps tapped into by her new ability to feel the queer trace of her mother.

So far, I have offered up some exchanges or statements where an authoritative narrative of events is contested by a woman’s feeling that she’s being lied to. While still pursuing her mother to reconstitute the family and thus restore order, Priscilla strangely becomes more attuned to the Homebody through the objects left behind. Her search through the city and the conversations she has with Milton require her to navigate her past, to rethink her relationship to her mother, and to come to new understandings—a process of *writing it*, or forecasting a queer futurity where the Homebody and she exist in new relations to each other. That is, only through this particularly queer trace can the Homebody *mean* and *be* to her what we might consider a mother to a daughter. Another important distinction Kushner makes in these scenes is the remarkable passivity of the Western male, accepting wholesale the narrative of his wife’s murder despite any evidence of a body. Milton *is* intimidated by the shredding of the newspaper used to demonstrate the death his wife met. While he is in Kabul he never leaves his hotel room, choosing instead to get drunk and then high on opium and heroin with his new ex-pat



acquaintance Quango.

News that the Homebody is alive comes through direct message to Kwaja. He takes Priscilla to the source of the information, a hat merchant named Zai Garshi, who delivers the Homebody's wishes to Priscilla: "Your mother; she wish you to know, she is not dead. She wish you to know: she have not been killed by anyone, all this is, ah, invented. She is happy, having met a gentleman. Some heavenly star-spangled night. She have spoken the kaleema ... And now she shall marry to a pious Muslim man of means. She wish to remain in Kabul, not to see you nor the father of you, her husband of the past" (76). The Homebody's message speaks to the intention of getting lost. Muñoz claims, "We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight mind's mapping of space" (72). The Homebody has chosen to get lost in a way that disarticulates the narrative of imperial feminism. That a Western woman fled *to* Kabul is an unimaginable move in imperial feminism's "mapping of space," geographically and domestically. The Homebody's retreat queers the mainstay subjectivities of the Western woman: liberated woman, wife, and mother. In getting lost, the Homebody renders herself lost "to a world [normative] imperatives, codes, and laws" (Muñoz 73). Arguing specifically from the perspective of sexuality, Muñoz writes, "Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order" (73). I would substitute "heteronormative" with "imperial feminist" order, as this is an order in which heteronormativity and homonormativity are active participants. The intimacy that Priscilla likens to walking into her mother's clothes closet collapses with her earlier metaphor that her mother *is* Kabul. The domestic and the geographic thread together and

allow Priscilla, and thus the audience, an anticipatory illumination (a queer horizon) of relations to strangeness. Zai expresses the offer of a trade made by the Homebody's new husband: "In exchange that this man keep your mother as wife of his, he wish you to help remove now-wife of his who is crazy, first wife, she wish to go away, to London preferably. I arrange meeting of you with crazy first wife. You and this lady leave Afghanistan. Your mother, these have her wish" (77). Any doubts Priscilla has are quelled when Zai is able to name the region in the guidebook marked by the Homebody as well as the music in the discman Priscilla carries. He asks to listen to it once more, and in doing so begins to mourn (in Dari) for the pre-Taliban Kabul. Kwaja comforts him and the scene ends with Priscilla demanding that Zai "Take me to my mother" (82).

She is taken to Mahala, a former librarian and the Afghani woman seeking to return to London with the Ceilings. Immediately, Mahala launches into a diatribe on the Taliban and on America, both of whom she claims are responsible for the current state of Kabul: "*These people speak Pashto, these strangers, these occupiers, these Taliban; Kabul speaks Dari. Did you know this? They are ethnic cleansers...The CIA sends these bastards funding through Pakistan, where the military high command, it's all Pashtuni-wallahs, these madmen and terrorists, they'll turn on their masters sooner or later, and still the U.S. pays them money and sends them guns*" (83-84, italics original). Khwaja attempts to translate for Priscilla, who can only muster "I'm English" to Mahala (85). "English, America, no difference, one big and one small, same country, America says, Britain do, women die, dark-skin babies die, land mine, Stinger *projectile*; British, American so what?" Mahala retorts (86). Initially the audience is led to believe that Mahala's character is meant to be the mother-substitute, we know this both by the

proposed trade of women and in Priscilla's command to be taken to her mother is answered by taking her to Mahala. In addition, the Homebody and Mahala are both bibliophiles, as we learn that Mahala was a librarian in Kabul before the Taliban shut down the library and banned women from reading. The audience may also recognize the Homebody in Mahala's verbal acrobatics, stringing her thoughts together out loud in Dari, French and English. Indeed both of these women have been called "crazy" by other characters, namely their respective husbands, but whereas the Homebody requires the old guidebook and an equivocal understanding of current events, Mahala speaks from personal experience—she need not refer to any source other than her own life.

Mahala also collapses the distance that Kushner has allowed the audience up to this point in the play. He has counted on an American audience to be more receptive to the Homebody's monologue and to Priscilla's adventure in the streets of Kabul by making the Ceiling family British. But, as Mahala points out, there isn't a difference between the United States and the United Kingdom, at least in the minds of natives of Kabul. As Mahala bursts this emotional "distance," the audience must confront their country's actions in relation to the events Mahala speaks of. For her, the Taliban and the West are both oppressors—no doubt a provocative notion and one that one Kushner clearly wants an American audience to contemplate. Mahala illustrates the oppressed lives of women like her in Kabul, women whose spirit has become bitter or worse:

*I want to walk down the streets again. I want to go to parties again. I have nothing to read! Women are dying all around me, I can hear the sounds from the houses when I peek out the window, when I walk in the burqa. My cousin, her daughter, she has hanged herself. My old friend Ziala...threw herself from the*

*roof of—... Taliban not to permit burial and I cannot go to see the body of my friend, my family afraid, no mahram will come and her body, what did he do? Her uncle? There are dogs in the street? Ziala body have been left in the streets for dogs? In my dreams, always, she does not come to me, her body is in the street, as it fell. I miss ... I miss ... (89)*

As Mahala is reduced to tears, Priscilla asks her if it is passage to London she seeks. Khwaja explains that all her papers are in order but that a sponsorship letter from the British embassy would make certain she could get there. Quango Twistleton can provide this letter, but we learn two scenes later that the price of the ticket is that Priscilla must sleep with him. The negotiation for the papers is interesting for being something other than what it looks like. When Priscilla returns to her hotel room her father is passed out on heroin and Quango has her underwear over his head and is about to masturbate. Her discovery leads to both of characters unveiling themselves, she her burqa and he her underwear. In the row that follows it is revealed that Milton has told Quango of Priscilla's abortion, among other things: "But I'm his daughter: And he doesn't even *know you*" (108). The stage notes explain that, after a pause, she gives him deep long kiss. She puts the burqa back on and moves to the door, waiting for him:

Q: Nights like this I know I'll never get clean. More than likely die in Kabul.  
You've made me so lonely, Priscilla.

P: No doubt. Pretty fucking lonely myself ... Orphan now. I guess you lead the way. (109)

The exchange here signals Priscilla's move away from what we might think of as a gender-normative power structure where the female character is coerced to sell her body

for access to the sponsorship letter. I read the exchange as an untying of familial kinship and a move toward queer futurity. Priscilla understands her father's sharing information about her terminated pregnancy to a stranger as an act of betrayal. That revelation itself stuns her, but her decision to trade sex for the letter is not an act of rebellion targeted at her father. Instead she is careful to ask about contraception, knowing that she is bedding a junkie. Her shift in demeanor has altered Quango too, as the two admit their loneliness to each other. But crucially, Priscilla says, "Orphan now," identifying as such even as her father is (physically) in this same room (109). It's her way of getting lost, even as she remains in complete control.

In the final scene of *Homebody/Kabul*, Mahala is seated in the Homebody's kitchen, as in Act 1, Scene i. It's about a year later, 1999, and she is described in the notes as "*becoming a modern English woman. She looks very different.*" (136). Priscilla walks in, and it becomes apparent that this is her first visit since she returned to London with her father, as well as Mahala. The sponsorship letter successfully granted Mahala passage there. Mahala has been living happily, apparently, with Milton in the Homebody's house. She tells Priscilla that she is reading the Quran again, "For all those terrible years, I was too angry. I am myself becoming Muslim again" (137). "I am myself becoming Muslim again" is a vivid statement for a couple of reasons. First, it rubs against the notion that even though she is becoming a modern English woman, and she looks very different, she feels like herself again—or is getting there. She is not becoming the Homebody, as the positioning of her in the same space might suggest. Mahala is reborn her old self in a new land. Second, she is becoming herself again through reading the Quran, not the Bible or the Torah. The very book that the Taliban claim to rule from is

provides Mahala these feelings of renewal: “The Book is so beautiful, even in English. In Arabic its beauty is inexpressible” (137). Critically, both Mahala and Priscilla resist the imperialist feminism imperative to assimilate to Western womanhood now that they’ve made lives for themselves in London. There is a moment in this scene where the savior narrative makes itself visible, but is then quickly put to rest. In rehashing an interrogation at the border, Mahala credits her stock for getting out of a potentially fatal situation: “I am no farmer’s wife, little Bibi Nobody. Since I was a girl, I ... *intimidate* everyone, and this perhaps has saved my life” (137). Angrily, Priscilla retorts, “I saved your ... Forget it” (137). Conversation continues as they discuss what will become of the Taliban and of Kabul. Uncertainty kills but certainty does too, they work out: “One idea for the whole world. The Dewey Decimal System is the only such system... Only it provides knowing, and nothing more” (138-39). Then, Mahala says to Priscilla, “You have saved me” (139); and Priscilla responds, “As I have been saved” (139). The savior rhetoric quickly returns and it’s worth reading the difference it makes here. Before, both women believed they were solely responsible for the present state of affairs. Now, Mahala gives Priscilla the credit she implied she deserved without entirely saying so just moments before. Likewise, Priscilla expresses her own salvation and attributes it to her mother, the Homebody. In the space that the Homebody left, Priscilla feels some joy: “Y’see Mum? One sharp goad from a terrible grief and ... the soul is waking up” (139). Each of the three women of the play have had a profound effect on each other, indeed, allowing the soul to wake up in each. Kushner achieves this feat through ways counterintuitive to audience expectations, for in the end we don’t have a reconstituted family. Rather, what remains at the end of the play are two women who offer up new ways of thinking about female relationality to

each other, to the domestic, and to international politics. And Kushner ends with the utopic metaphor of the garden. Mahala tells Priscilla that she has rehabilitated the Homebody's neglected garden: "To a Kabuli woman, how shall I express what these English gardens mean? ... A garden shows us what may await us in Paradise ... In the garden outside, I have planted all my dead" (139-40). Mahala conveys a going back to get to the future. A return to the Quran, a planting of the dead so that it may bring forth new life, and a tending of Paradise may all aptly be Kushner's then and there of queer futurity.

## Chapter V: The Sissy Vantage: Re-visioning Suspect Citizens

On January 17, 2017, with just three days left of his presidency, Barack Obama issued clemency to Chelsea Manning, the Army Private who leaked classified military intelligence, diplomatic cables, and various video and other media to the Internet transparency group WikiLeaks. Commuting her sentence to time served (seven years), Manning was freed from military prison on May 17, 2017. A senior White House official explained the rationale behind the decision: “Chelsea Manning accepted responsibility for the crimes she committed. She expressed remorse for those crimes. She began serving the sentence that was handed down. The president’s concern was rooted in the fact that the sentence handed down is longer than sentences given to other individuals who committed comparable crimes” (Nakashima). Manning’s 35-year sentence was approximately 20 times that of similar cases—the longest conviction ever imposed in the United States for a leak (Nakashima). *The Washington Post* calls the president’s clemency actions “dramatic” and “surprising” given that his administration pursued more leak prosecutions than all previous ones combined (Nakashima).

What does it mean to grant clemency to Private Manning as one of Obama’s final presidential acts? It is perhaps a too indefinite question, yet its answers, have high stakes particularly for black and other non-white, queer, and trans communities in the political present. More broadly, I’m gripped by the ways in which this act illuminates the “kinship and estrangements” (Stryker 159) between transness (Manning) and blackness (Obama) given the wave of overt white nationalism that has ushered Donald Trump to the presidency and evidenced by, for example, the call for a ban on immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations, the call for a transgender military ban, and the violent Richard



Spencer-led rally in Charlottesville, VA. The affinity of transness and blackness, I argue, is to do with proximity to militarized masculinity in the American imaginary, where power is concentrated in white cis-heteropatriarchy. Likewise, I do not claim transness to be conflated with blackness and vice-versa; rather, I'm curious about the fugitivity of the two and its compatibility with sissy critique. The sissy figure is direct opposition to the dominant power structure that I call militarized masculinity. As such, the sissy is out of touch and out of time with the norms and values of this ideology and instead functions within the realms of the feminine or non-binary, vulnerable, fierce, often poor, often non-white, and sexually and politically queer. I see the sissy as having qualities in relation to and intersecting with black and trans values and ways of living. To explore this matrix and articulate a sissy critique, I traverse three contemporary trajectories that might bring some clarity and hope in uncertain times. First, I analyze Chelsea Manning's "traitorous" leak to be assert that it was a subversive and political act of dark sousveillance. Second, I read Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen* to throw light on #BlackLivesMatter and a call for revising the dominant notion of "citizen" through the immersive "eye" and use of second-person point-of-view. Third, I contemplate the final frame of Barry Jenkin's Academy Award-winning-film *Moonlight* as a confrontational "looking back" yet hopeful "look beyond" toward a locus for beauty, value, justice, and life in the face of otherwise. Taken together, I offer up a sissy critique that engages irruptive, disruptive, and seditious acts of *seeing* and *looking back*, *leaking* and *talking back*, and *touching* and *feeling*, causing disorder that lays bare oppressive state violence operating under the banner of security.

In the issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* titled "The Issue of Blackness" (May 2017), the editors remark upon the initial stages of institutionalizing

transgender studies as a discipline that “functions as a scene of subjection for blackness—for Black people and places” (Ellison et al. 162). Noting that moves to institutionalization too often neglect to give explicit acknowledgment to women of color feminism, the contributors featured in “The Issue of Blackness” insist upon a theorization of Black trans\*/studies<sup>1</sup> through citing the work of Black women and integrating Black feminist analysis (Ellison et al. 166). As I proceed to explore the “transversal relationality of blackness to transness” (Stryker 160-61) in this chapter, I’m mindful that my conception of sissy critique is foremost rooted in queer of color analysis—an analytic descendant from women of color feminism. Even so, according to the editors, “If we ask what is new about Black queer studies, the answer is ‘trans’” (Ellison et al. 163); thus, my engagement with “a Trans\* method” (Ellison et al. 163) is not simply an embrace and naming of another non-cisgender subjectivity as “sissy,” but a way of expanding the possibilities for critiquing militarized masculinity.

“Black and trans\* are both disruptive orientations indexed imperfectly by bodies said to be black or trans\* and thus can succumb to logics of white supremacy and cis sexism” (278), Marquis Bey writes in his article “The Trans\*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans\*-ness,” drawing attention to the relation but not equivalence of Black and trans analytics to their physical referent. Like the sissy figure, whose body also has potential for disrupting hegemonic stability, it is the method of critique (an analytic) that Bey and myself put forward from spaces of what Hortense Spillers calls “contradiction,

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<sup>1</sup> The asterisk in “trans\*” is used often throughout the issue of *TSQ*. Marquis Bey describes the asterisk as “a disruptive, eruptive orientation”—“starfishy...fingery...celestial” (284). I use the asterisk only when citing directly; otherwise my non-use of the asterisk or the prefixal “trans-” is, to borrow from Chelsea Manning, an aesthetic choice.

indictment, and the refusal” (qtd. in Bey 278). This difference is an important distinction to make so as not to predetermine someone’s politics and their relation to power based on their race, gender, and sexuality. We know that a transgender person can be politically conservative, and that someone who identifies as black may be transphobic (Bey 277). Nevertheless, as power is presently (and historically) situated within a white supremacist, masculine, and heterosexual context in the United State (and Western modernity), racial, gender, and sexual minorities, regardless of citizen status, are always already suspicious signifiers to power because of their embodied difference. Thus, despite the best efforts of some to assimilate into traditional institutions, these minorities are preceded by their prospective threat to authority. But when we consider the perspective of black and trans, each coming from their own “interpretive historical entrenchment,” we realize they are “nodes of one another;” that is, “they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology...they perennially speak with, through, alongside, and back to one another over there on the outskirts of the order of purity” (Bey 278).

There is a rich archive of scholarship derived from an “anoriginal lawlessness” that I draw upon and inspires my argumentation in this chapter. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call such a space (within the university) the undercommons of enlightenment, a “downlow lowdown maroon community...where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong” (26). Such a community is made of “composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black

college sociologists, and feminist engineers;” and in the Undercommons, “its maroons, are always at war, always in hiding” (30). The geographical condition of borderlands, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa argues, offers strategies of social survival by the “prohibited and forbidden” who “are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half breed, the half dead; in short those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of ‘normal’” (25). Historian Nayan Shah explains how “interloper masculinities,” marked by their foreignness and depravity, came to threaten “normative American masculinity” through social interactions between “white adolescent males and Asian migrants” in borderland spaces of migrant life (704). The resulting suspicions, “turned ...the streets, alleys, boardinghouses, labor camps, and ranches where migrant workers congregated...into borderland spaces characterized by disorder, conflict, and murky social and sexual ties between males” (704). Movement toward containment of threat—black, trans, fugitive, foreigner, migrant laborer, refugee, queer, half breed, etc.—, which is also a containment of movement, via the law has also given rise to a logic of security whose hegemonic maintenance is deployed through various regimes of surveillance, collection and storage of users’ mobile and Internet data, irregular checkpoints, and permanent terminals. Hagar Kotef explains the logic of security as a contradiction of two opposite trajectories working in tandem: “the discourse of reconciliation and its constant undoing by growing securitization, which often takes the form of eruptive violence” (29). Kotef contends the Israeli occupation of Palestine is most illustrative of the logic of security. Here, Israel, bolstered by its (U.S.-aided) military, positions itself as morally superior in order to justify violence against Palestinians, who present a potential “terror”

risk. Palestinian movement is restricted in the occupied land by checkpoints and terminals run by Israeli military and police. At these spaces of restricted movement, an imaginary line is drawn “(metaphorically, abstractly, in thin air) by Israeli soldiers,” one that

delimits the permitted movements of Palestinians within the space of the checkpoint, yet a line that exists only in the minds of the soldiers standing in front of them. As such, the imaginary line is a technique and symbol of a particular form of controlling a given space, which not only relies on controlling the rules applying to this space, but also, and most important, on controlling the knowledge of those rules. (Kotef 30)

The imaginary line is a technology of power that presents itself as necessary for peace and order while it simultaneously produces disorderly subjects. Seeing checkpoints and terminals as disciplinary sites, Israeli soldiers, “successful products of two highly structured disciplinary apparatuses—the school system and the army,” assume the role of teacher and dole out corporal punishment: “Caught transgressing, the Palestinians are punished so they will learn not to repeat the ‘bad behavior’” (Kotef 33). Punishments such as detention followed by a lecture often follow transgressions to the imaginary line, which, because they are imaginary, always fail to be effective disciplinary operations (Kotef 33). And so, the peace process is continuously deterred, delayed, out of reach because Palestinians remain ungovernable, reinforcing the need for security zones such as checkpoints and terminals—two opposite trajectories dependent on one another in the service of the logic of security.

I offer up these examples as a few of the ways scholarship has addressed fugitivity, lawlessness, and other disruptive orientations as productive spaces and positionalities to imagine political strategy and live life beyond the stultifying and violent normativity of the status quo. They also provide some insight to the level of paranoia that structures of power have because of them—simply because they exist as an “*alternative statement, as a counterstatement to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization,*” as Spillers says (qtd. in Bey 278). Each of these examples gives texture to oppositional positionalities to state power. It’s to put what I’m calling here, “suspect citizens,” focusing primarily on blackness and transness, in relation to others who exist in the periphery or margins of society and face extraordinary hostility at the hands of the military, police, or other state institutions. My use of suspect citizens draws from M. Jacqui Alexander’s premise of “neo-imperial,” when she claims that the U.S. state operates on “the constitution of a new empire, accelerated militarization, and war” (234). The newest iteration of U.S. neo-imperialism, Alexander asserts, is the massive forfeiture of privacy codified in the Patriot Act of 2001 and of 2002, and the national Security Act of 2002, which came to be following the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (234). Alexander’s analytic of neo-imperialism complements my own conception of militarized masculinity as an ideology linking the imperial project to militarization and nation building. As I argue, militarized masculinity operates on multiple frequencies including the quotidian motions of patriotism—the pledge of allegiance in public schools, standing for the national anthem at public events, uncritical support for the military and veterans, and various other displays or sentiment of national pride—as well as its amplified form when disaster or threat of disaster strikes—terrorist attack (typically

named as such when by claimed by a foreign organization, or a non-white individual), launch of nuclear warheads, refugee crises, or natural catastrophes such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and mudslides. It always is acting as a rubric of inclusion/exclusion, sifting good subjects from bad, but it consolidates its power and flexes its pugnacious capability in times of real or perceived threat. Alexander calls this a time of “hypernationalism with a number of constituent parts” (234):

The manufacture of an outside enemy to rationalize military intervention and secure the annexation of land; the production of an internal enemy to rationalize criminalization and incarceration; the internal production of a new citizen patriot; the creation and maintenance of a permanent war economy, whose internal elements devolve on the militarization of the police and the resultant criminalization of immigrants, people of color, and working-class communities through the massive expansion of a punishment economy at whose center is the prison industrial complex...[and] constituted as well through those state practices...that are aimed at constituting a nation that is based in an originary nuclear family in ways that couple the nuclear with the heterosexual. (Alexander 234)

The attributes of hypernationalism, as a result of the ubiquitous “Acts” named above wed white supremacy, heteronormativity, and a logic of security in a mighty way, one that “signals a major reconstruction within, and major reconsolidation of, the American state apparatus” (Alexander 234). It also brings to the foreground the set of colonial relations among non-whites, non-natives (immigrants, the undocumented, political refugees), trans

and sissy queers with the American state apparatus, and renders them vulnerable to its disciplinary institutions such as the police, prison, deportation officers, and the law itself.

Kotef's explanation of the logic of security rings true to Alexander's notion of hypernationalism in the post-9/11 U.S. There has been no de-escalation of security and surveillance in what is now more than 15 years since the initial Patriot Act, and it seems unimaginable, in the main, that it would move in such a direction. Rather, hypernationalism has produced "different kinds of patriots" to do the ideological labor of militarized masculinity: the state patriot, the citizen soldier patriot, and the citizen patriot (Alexander 238). The state patriots "secur[e] their class interests through the annexation of land and territory, arguing the grand narratives of an ancient titanic call to freedom, civilization and Christian modernity through war, positioning free enterprise...as the tradition that requires protection" (Alexander 238). She explains that citizen soldier patriots "[comprise] the imperial fighting force, the class of racial composition of which exposes the contradictions implicit in the racialization of empire" (Alexander 238). Finally, Alexander defines the citizen patriot as one who "like the state patriot, stays home, but who exercises patriotism through another of the technologies of globalization—the Internet" (238). For Alexander, who's theorization of "neo-imperial" here derives at the conjuncture of the wake of 9/11, the mobilization of the "war on terror," and the rise of the U.S. security state, the Internet is the "nexus" for simultaneously building empire, manufacturing a racialized (and religious) enemy, and disseminating propaganda (created by state patriots) for citizen patriots' consumption—a kind of ideological playbook for new times—and the medium for plotting, recruiting, and various other kinds of moral corruption and deviancy: "in short, the place where the



terrorist, the enemy, and the sexual pervert meet, the place where the sexual anxieties of domination and conquest thrive, enacting a form of violent spectacle similar in function to the postcard texts through which nineteenth-century European orientalism was produced and the more grotesque photographic representation of lynching that pervaded the American South at the turn of the twentieth century” (238). It fashions good, or “normal,” citizens over and against suspect citizens who are often people of color, immigrants, some LGBTQ+, and Muslims. Indeed, the florescent effect of the 9/11 terrorist attack granted the Internet to be the space for the national imaginary to play out its revenge fantasies, often causing material cost and violence to those deemed “suspect.” Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have argued that this flashpoint signaled the return of monstrosity as a means of organizing “the discourse on terrorism,” and together with knowledge of a sexual perversity has resulted in the construction of the “monster-terrorist-fag” (118, 127). The consolidation of a vigorous and aggressive heterosexual patriotism announced itself plainly in an “Us vs. Them” or “With us or against us” posture. This muscular position, I argue, is not a new or surprising answer to a shared national wounding; rather, it is the predictable answer—a flex of militarized masculinity—of an ideology that has already been operating within the guise of neoliberal multiculturalism. The change then, or what makes this reaction notable, is that U.S. citizens so willingly permitted the massive expansion in disciplinary apparatuses, and “docile patriots”’ unambiguous desire to be in cahoots with the state when it came to matters of policing fellow citizens, on the Internet or otherwise. Alexander puts it another way: “These varied heterosexual anxiety narratives—of violence, of injury and shame,

and of punishment and retaliation—simultaneously produce the enemy and issue an invitation to the citizen patriot to attend to the propaganda of war” (240-41).

In an effort to set the stage for my readings of the commutation of Chelsea Manning and the Black Lives Matter movement, I have dwelled on scholarship that gives scope to the valuation of life in post-9/11 America. In particular, I have called attention to work that gives me language to express the production of suspect citizens, particularly when they manifest as such through heightened security and data collection and analysis (i.e., the Internet, TSA checkpoints, NSA surveillance, criminal statistics, and beyond). I posit that these data and surveillance technologies operating within a logic of security, including the ideological narratives that drive a desire for them, are also the locus for resistance—a failing to be hailed by these very systems of knowing. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate breakdowns, or the radical disruptive potential of being “in the break,” in the production of suspect citizens by deconstructing its processes through a dynamic interplay of trans thought and black thought.

I’ve suggested in the opening of this chapter that there is something unique about President Obama’s announcement to commute Chelsea Manning’s prison sentence in his final days in office. After all, Manning’s entire case timeline occurred during Obama’s tenure, and it was a remarkable in its demonstrative condemnation of her leak resulting in a sentence 20 times the norm. However, if ever there was a moment to free Chelsea Manning it was going to be before then president-elect Donald Trump took office on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Some strange affinity between Obama and Manning suddenly seems to make sense in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, a result that writer Ta-Nehisi Coates argues begets the negation of Obama’s legacy as the foundation of his (Trump’s)

own. Said plainly, white supremacy suddenly throws light on the contours that shape the relationality of Manning and Obama. Years before his election, Trump, as a private citizen and public figure, made a spectacle of the sitting president by advocating birtherism, “the modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built,” eventually forcing Obama to present his birth certificate (Coates). He also offered to pay \$5 million in exchange for Obama’s college grades, believing him to lack the intelligence of an Ivy League education (Coates). Adding to the rumors that Obama practices Islam, a maligned charge during his first presidential campaign, Trump sought to make suspect not only Obama’s legitimacy as president but his citizenship too. Trump’s response to Manning’s commuted sentence via Twitter drew attention to his use of the word “traitor”: “The use of the word ‘traitor’ is often tossed around by political leaders and others to describe alleged acts that threaten national security. But it is rare for a president to brand someone as a traitor,” Brian Murphy writes in his article for *The Washington Post*. The January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 tweet reads: “Ungrateful TRAITOR Chelsea Manning, who should never have been released from prison, is now calling President Obama a weak leader. Terrible!” (Murphy). At first glance, it would seem to be a straight forward message that calls out Manning’s lack of gratitude toward Obama for her commuted sentence. Journalist Brian Murphy points to Manning’s January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 piece in *The Guardian*, in which she argues that Obama’s legacy “will leave ‘few permanent accomplishments’ because he often sought common ground and compromise rather than battling harder against ‘unparalleled resistance from his opponents’ ... ‘What we need is an unapologetic progressive leader’” (qtd. in Murphy). However, I read the tweet as yoking Manning and Obama to acts of treason.

Calling Manning a traitor is hardly a political risk, especially for Trump, but his faux outrage at Manning's response to freedom is actually about harnessing Obama to a sissy figure capable of treason, in effect, a terrorist. Trump gets to assert his masculine strength by proclaiming that Manning should not have been released (read: he would not have commuted her sentence) and feminize Obama by way of a taunt in the vein of militarized masculinity that implies he has been dominated by a transgender prisoner who called him "a weak leader" (she didn't). Here I harken back to Alexander, Puar and Rei who theorize the construct of the suspect citizen as a process of collapsing the enemy, the terrorist, and the sexual pervert. To note the final word "Terrible!" is not a far cry from "terrorist" in this context is unsurprising, even it shouldn't be.

There is more to be said about the ways in which Trump's aggressive white supremacy and infamous heterosexuality make strange bedfellows of Manning and Obama, but it's also worthwhile to interrogate this association in his absence. The source of their connection is Manning's leak of "war logs" as an Army private stationed in Iraq. Her excessive sentence and inhumane treatment while incarcerated made her an example of the Obama administration's toughness on intelligence leaks and an icon of sorts for hackers, anti-war collectives, and groups advocating government transparency. She came out as transgender following her sentencing, increasing her public profile and drawing significant support and sympathy from the far-left, the queer community, and some veterans. All the while, Obama's evolving views on LGBT rights and recognition and U.S. law expanded, including the repeal of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, the legalization of same-sex marriage across the U.S., and allowing transgender individuals to openly serve in U.S. armed forces. Perhaps, when laid out in parallel, there

is a semblance of the uncanny that makes Obama's act of commuting Manning's sentence inevitable. Yet, as I proceed to analyze key events in Manning's journey to freedom, the thinness of Obama's trans inclusion becomes more apparent.

Manning describes her decision to enlist in the Army as the thing to "man her up" (Shaer). At this point in time, she is not Chelsea but Bradley Manning of Crescent, Oklahoma, and she is drawing from the military stories her father, Brian, "fondly recounted" (Shaer). Coincidentally, "man up" was also Brian's advice his young son who was bullied for coming out as gay in elementary school (Shaer). With these echoes from her childhood, Manning decided the best way to rid the ache of her then undiagnosed gender dysphoria was to become a soldier: "I remember sitting in the summer of 2007 and just every single day turning on the TV...The surge, the surge, the surge. Terrorist attacks, Insurgents. ... I just felt like maybe I could make a difference" (qtd. in Shaer). In recounting her reasons for joining the military, Manning articulates the ideology of militarized masculinity disciplining her from a young age. She recognizes her sexual and gendered difference at an early age and seeks to remedy it through a remasculinization project facilitated by the military. Echoes of the Moynihan Report, where African American sons of single-mother households were encouraged to join the armed services as a corrective for their absent father, reverberate in Manning's logic. One can intuit the way Manning, as a queer youth, associates her femininity with pain and suffering that can only possibly be relieved through squashing it. After an initial failure at basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in the Missouri Ozarks, she is allowed to train at Fort Huachuca in Arizona where she specializes sorting "'SigActs,' or significant actions—the written reports, photos and videos of the confrontations, explosions and firefights that form the

mosaic of modern war” (Shaer). She deployed to Iraq in October of 2009 and was stationed at Forward Operating Base Hammer. The monotony of the job quickly descended upon her psyche, and she realized the futility of the wars as she spent entire workdays scanning and sifting through records and media: “At a certain point...I stopped seeing records and started seeing people” (qtd. in Shaer). Manning’s exposure to war on the ground, even from the refuge of the F.O.B. Hammer, marks her as a citizen soldier patriot, but one who can no longer separate the enemy from their humanity. In short, her disillusionment with the information she was processing daily combined with her gender dysphoria and homosexuality during the DADT-era partly informed her decision to download “almost every SigActs report from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” and burn them to CD-RWs. She then uploaded them to her personal laptop before her visit home, where her attempts to share this information with *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Politico* all failed (Shaer). Realizing while back in the states that the wars seemed to have become invisible to Americans, she decided to pursue disseminating the information to the transparency Web site WikiLeaks: “There were two worlds...The world in America, and the world I was seeing...I wanted people to see what I was seeing” (qtd. in Shaer).

I quote at length Chelsea Manning’s profile with Matthew Shaer for *The New York Times Magazine* (June 12, 2017), because it enunciates the quintessential script for militarized masculinity and its undoing. Here, Manning recounts the recognition of her sexual and gender perversity and seeks out a reparative experience (“man up”) through military service. She also answers the nation’s call to serve during wartime, marking a patriotic intuition. However, in this case the script fails to meet its promise. What

Manning doesn't have language for as a queer youth, and what she tries to rectify in her enlistment desire to "man up," is transness. Transness is always already preceding her. In this specific case I'm more accurately speaking to *transitivity*, "the beginningness that underlies the (gendered) conditions of possibility that allow for distinction" (Bey 285). Her enlistment undoes the template of the military itself as guarantor of militarized masculinity, while simultaneously crumbling the foundation of what Alexander terms the citizen soldier patriot. Said another way, Manning's affiliation with the armed forces is not a supplement to the military (as maker and model of militarized masculinity) but, when starting from the military, the displacement of it (to riff on Bey's formulation: Bey 285). It has that form of radical destabilizing potentiality. In this way, I propose that Manning's narrative of how she came to be a private in the U.S. Army and her decision to leak "SigActs" to the Internet site WikiLeaks to be "a disruptive and irruptive undercommon subversion" (Bey 286). It is a transitive, undercommon subversiveness that exposes "the messiness of the two conflicts" and leads to Manning's imprisonment (Shaer). Transitivity also stresses the chasms in what has been a consistent, if not static, American mythos: the narrative of militarized masculinity in which young, often wayward recruits enlist in the military and self-actualize as a result of a disciplined training regime.

In what follows, I contrast Manning's transitive potential, the potential that is always already present but not yet recognized or engaged, with its veritable impact. I want to draw attention the dynamic and explosive transformation of Manning from "citizen soldier patriot" to "suspect citizen" and "traitor," which is simultaneously the transformation from Bradley, to Brianna (briefly), and finally to Chelsea Elizabeth

Manning, and to read her leak in relation to and perhaps as an act of what Simone Browne calls “dark sousveillance.” In her book, *Dark Matter: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Browne expands the term “sousveillance,” developed by Steve Mann as a form of oversight in which an entity not in a position of power or authority observes and records those performing acts of surveillance (Browne 19). We might readily recognize sousveillance today by the impulse to livestream an encounter between a fellow pedestrian and a police officer, as a means to bear witness and keep receipts should it escalate to violence. Browne’s term “dark sousveillance” is a “way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of oversight” (21). Browne’s vast archive of acts of dark sousveillance span from “Negro spirituals” and “lantern laws” all the way to dealing with anti-black surveillance at the TSA checkpoints. That is to say, dark sousveillance has persisted since times of slavery because anti-black surveillance continues to find new ways of maintaining the order of things. Like sissy critique, Browne’s dark sousveillance takes form specific to its particular time. She explains, “I plot dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. Dark sousveillance, then, plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being” (21). Importantly, Browne conceives dark sousveillance not as an essentialist critique, rather “acts that might fall under the rubric of dark sousveillance are not strictly enacted by those who fall under the category of blackness” (21). My reading of Manning’s leak of the SigActs pertaining to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq turns on Browne’s conception of dark sousveillance, one that propels her (although presenting as



masculine as Bradley) from a position of authority as a white male Private in the U.S. Army to a trans-woman inmate at a U.S. military prison, and that reconstitutes the image of the U.S. (in the eyes of the global world) in light of the information made visible through WikiLeaks.

As noted above, Manning trained to process information for intelligence purposes. When she was deployed to Iraq, her daily life was not in the field where she'd be exposed to gunfire or land mines, but in a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, or SCIF, at F.O.B. Hammer. Here she sat before three laptop computers for eight-hour shifts, "sifting through reports filed securely by American troops in the field, making sense of the raw data for senior-level intelligence officers" (Shaer). As an arbiter of data flowing in from the wars, Manning occupied a distinctive position of power in that intelligence decisions were made based on the information she filtered, arranged, and deemed worthy of action. Her position as receiver and reader of an immense amount of military data locates her at a unique vantage as surveiller of surveillance of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, so much of how Manning describes her work here is by what she *sees* or *doesn't see*. In her *New York Times Magazine* profile, Matthew Shaer writes:

At that early juncture, Manning told me, she was too busy to give much thought to the larger import of what she was seeing. "Doing my job, you couldn't even really read all the files," she said. "You have to skim, get a sense of what's relevant and what's not." Still, to an extraordinary extent, she had a more comprehensive view of America's role in Iraq that the infantry in the field did—often, literally, a sky-level view—and as October ground into November, she found herself increasingly dismayed by a lack of public awareness about what

seemed to be a futile, ceaselessly bloody war. “At a certain point,” she told me, “I stopped seeing records and started seeing people”: bloody American soldiers, bullet-ridden Iraqi civilians. (Shaer)

Acting as a kind of intelligence sieve, Manning operates a cumulative gaze that is all-encompassing. Having established this role, I posit Manning’s turn toward dark sousveillance as one marked by *seeing* Iraqi and Afghani civilians, whose lives are made to exist in a constant state of precarity and *recognizing* their oppression. In its local and literal iteration, this oppression is manifest in the U.S. military, occupying Iraq and Afghanistan and maintaining its DADT policy, which is also a form of surveillance. In a broader context, this oppression operates within an ideology of militarized masculinity, where white cis-heteropatriarchy is the locus of power and keeps order (normativity) through state-sanctioned surveillance, containment, and violence.

When Manning transfers the SigActs to her personal computer with the intention of giving them to the U.S. press, she has consciously chosen to subvert the power structure that positions the U.S. military as surveiller, watcher of the racialized Other (Iraqi and Afghani), who are always already coded as suspect/terrorist. The move is one of *undersight*, a dark sousveillance. That it is WikiLeaks and not the press, whose apathy to Manning at the time speaks to their compliance with militarized masculinity, is fitting precisely because it is not beholden to any citizens of a particular nation. Seeing the information she leaked being made available to the world gave Manning sense of justice, that she was doing the right thing: “Living such an opaque life, has forced me never to take transparency, openness and honesty for granted” (qtd. in Shaer). At the same time she made transparent the military war logs, she came out as transgender to her Army

superior in an email in which she attached a photo of herself as Brianna—the name she gave herself when she was experimenting being trans in public while on leave (and the same time she was reaching out to the press and then uploading the information to WikiLeaks). Manning recalls the email was “swept under the rug” (qtd. in Shaer), rendering her immutably male (as Bradley). Simultaneous acts of making U.S. war crimes, lies, and other misrepresentations transparent and coming out as transgender is spectacularly fugitive and speaks to the vantage of the sissy figure. Mapping Manning’s trajectory illustrates my contention that her leak was an act of dark sousveillance, as she moves from a white male soldier participating in the U.S. military’s theater of suspicion toward freedom by announcing herself as Brianna (later Chelsea) and turning attention (the eye) to and making subject of the U.S. foreign policy and militarism.

The immediate repercussions for the leak may appear to negate my contention that this was a liberatory gesture by Manning. Thinking alongside and through Browne’s dark sousveillance grants me a theoretical approach for reading Manning’s leak as a radical disruption routed through circuits of transness and blackness. It permits a sissy critique precisely through this vantage, or way of looking back at hegemonic powers rooted in militarized masculinity. Drawing from Black feminist scholar bell hooks’ black gaze as an oppositional gaze, I propose that sissy vantage is “political and transformative,” a defiant declaration: ““Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality”” (qtd. in Browne 58). Manning’s gaze became disruptive when she liberated herself from her training as an intelligence sieve in service to the U.S. military. Recognizing the relation of militarized masculinity as that which concurrently oppressed the people of Afghanistan and Iraq and kept her in the closet, Manning’s defiant gesture,

in effect, redirected military surveillance, which is also a racialized surveillance, onto itself—a movement from the object to the subject. From a sissy vantage, the leak indeed did much to change the international perception of the war on terror. Hailed by some as a whistle-blower and others as a traitor, Manning quickly became yoked with movements for more government transparency, calls to end the surveillance of private citizens, and a more shrewd and critical sentiment toward U.S. militarism. In his profile piece, Mathew Shaer writes: “The Afghan and Iraq documents brought home, in exactly the way that Manning had hoped, the messiness of the two conflicts. *The Guardian* wrote in an introduction that the release of the material from Afghanistan revealed a war in stark contrast with the ‘tidied up and sanitized ‘public’ war, as glimpsed through official communiqués as well as the necessarily limited snapshots of embedded reporting.’” Not only did the leak lay bare U.S. militarism in all its complicated forms, it made a compelling case for re-visioning the war on terror and its costs, both financial and in lives lost. The U.S. could hardly tout its moral authority as reason to wage war and occupy these countries any longer, much as they had in manufacturing consent in the wake of 9/11.

While Manning made the business of war hyper-visible to the world, the U.S. Army was quick to make her invisible. In May of 2010 she was arrested and sent to Camp Arfijan in Kuwait where she was held in isolation until July when she was moved to the brig at Quantico in Virginia (Shaer). Before charges were brought against her, Manning was held in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day under Prevention of Injury status. A 2011 investigation by the United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur Juan E. Méndez stressed that “solitary confinement is a harsh measure which

may cause serious psychological and physiological adverse effects on individuals regardless of their specific conditions” (74). In addition, “solitary confinement can amount to a breach of article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and to an act defined in article 1 or article 16 of the Convention against Torture” (74). Méndez was granted an interview with Manning “to ascertain the precise conditions of [her] detention” before she was moved to Fort Leavenworth but declined the invitation because the U.S. government “could not ensure that the conversation would not be monitored” (74). The request to meet with Manning in a “private, unmonitored, and privileged” setting was again denied five months after the initial request. The U.S. government’s response to why Manning was being subject to solitary confinement as an uncharged detainee reads: “the prison rules authorized the brig commander to impose it on account of the seriousness of the offence for which [she] would eventually be charged” (75). What’s striking about this statement to the UN Special Rapporteur is the immediate stripping of Manning’s rights as a U.S. citizen and soldier, and the rationalizing of her current treatment as deserving of the charges which she’ll undoubtedly leveled. The rather cavalier statement seems closely aligned to the response to a wounding of militarized masculinity—to expose and make vulnerable the U.S. military by one of their own, a citizen soldier patriot who we come to learn is transgender. The impulse to capture, contain, and render invisible the “monster-terrorist-fag” figure is so in sync with that ideology that it seems natural and justifiable. Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, to note that the other human rights violation noted in the Méndez’s report featured “16 gay and transgender individuals” who “have allegedly been subjected to solitary confinement, torture and ill-treatment while in detention in U.S.

immigration facilities” (75). The information given to the Special Rapporteur reports a “lack of protection from persecution and respect for the principle of non-refoulement for those who risk torture if returned to their home countries on account of their sexual orientation, gender identity or HIV status” (75). In this instance, and in the case of Manning, the United Nations Special Rapporteur found the U.S. government in violation of human rights, noting in the latter case: “imposing seriously punitive conditions of detention on someone who has not been found guilty of any crime is a violation of [her] physical and psychological integrity as well as of [her] presumption of innocence” (75). This report, dated February 29, 2012, was an addendum from the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. The repeal of the U.S. military policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was fully implemented on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011, and just over a year later in October of 2012, Vice President Joe Biden said transgender discrimination was the “civil rights issue of our time.” This timeline gives a perplexing sense of queer and trans recognition at the national level moving from the horizon to reality while at the same time that Manning and other queer and trans detainees, citizens and migrants alike, are out of sight and facing indefinite solitary confinement, torture, and ill-treatment.

My reading of the Manning saga is an attempt to stage what I am calling sissy vantage, a deconstruction of militarized masculinity that moves through fugitive acts of *seeing, being seen, and looking back*. She announced herself as Chelsea Elizabeth Manning, a transgender woman, in August of 2013, after being convicted with 17 of 22 charges, though she was acquitted of “aiding the enemy.” Her unprecedented 35-year prison sentence signaled a warning to future whistle-blowers, leakers, hackers, and other digital fugitives. But the extraordinary sentence, and her story more generally, also

brought attention to the significance of her action, and in large part a more public suspicion about the efficacy of the justice system. There's no question that her punishment far exceeds the crime when held up to similar cases, thus one is led to wonder to what extent her role her transgender status came into her pre-trial treatment as well as her sentencing—remember, she had disclosed her identity as Brianna to her direct superior, in addition to those running the detention centers that held her captive. It's a question put into sharp relief as the media celebrated the repeal of the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy by singling out the viral coming out YouTube video by airman Randy Phillips (he records his telephone conversation with his father). Phillips is the embodiment of a U.S. soldier—strong, masculine, attractive, white—fit to be the face of a more inclusive U.S. military without having to expand the nation's imaginary much at all. Juxtaposing the jubilation of the DADT repeal with Manning's story, demonstrates the paradox of the times—the military institution recognizing and embracing LGBT soldiers and then ordering them to fall in line with their work of neo-colonialism through occupation, engage in violence and extrajudicial killing, torture prisoners, and manage extensive surveillance, intelligence and data archives. These are some of the tasks that get performed under the banner of defending our nation. Manning's defection proves the limits of what an institution like the military will tolerate. By disappearing her, the U.S. military and the judicial system confirm their allegiance to militarized masculinity and reiterate its values.

This system of values has been playing out dramatically in the U.S. in the killings of black citizens by an ever-increasing militarized police force or by non-black citizens who “stand their ground” in the face of the perceived threat of black bodies. It's not a

question of How did we get here, for we have always been here. The movement that has emerged as a result of this most recent iteration of lynching is called Black Lives Matter, or #BlackLivesMatter, a movement whose face is largely queer and female (Taylor 165). The necessity that it came to exist during the Obama years is not a paradox but a testament to the persistence of hegemonic power rooted in militarized masculinity but savvy to the desire for an illusion of a postracial American, illuminated by his impressive win over the war hero John McCain. The election of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election felt like a sea change for the U.S., particularly for black Americans, especially black youth, who felt the abandonment by the government in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Taylor 139). Not even the nation's first African American president could stem race matters during his tenure. Keanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a scholar of black politics, social movements, and racial inequalities, writes that "Obama broke the mold," but his terms for dealing with racial politics were dealt "with dubious evenhandedness, even in response to events that required decisive action on behalf of the racially aggrieved" (138). She goes on to name his posture as one of an "informed observer:" "We are led to believe that a man who can direct drone strikes in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan, who can mobilize resources to any corner of the world in the name of American foreign policy, is powerless to champion legislation and the enforcement of existing laws and rights in the interest of social justice" (Taylor 138). We can see in the Taylor's lament the trappings of militarized masculinity befall even a black president, or this particular black president who is the first. The great lengths the government will take to protect itself from suspected threats goes unmatched. Likewise, it brings into florescence the white supremacy upon which the government operates via



foreign policy and militarism, and through the nation's laws and law enforcement, and the hyper-visibility of Obama's blackness. Of course, this critique is directed to the specific matter of black death with impunity in the Black Lives Matter era, which continues under the Trump administration.

What's relevant here is the failure of *his* blackness to rupture or disrupt the long history of black violence and death in America. Rather, like airman Phillips who becomes a poster-boy for the homonormative soldier, Obama's racial difference had to toe the line of the status quo. If, as I try to argue throughout, blackness (and transness) is a refusing imposition—never resting, always “in movement of flight, of escape, of fugitivity from the confines of ontological pinning down” (Bey 279)—Obama's ascent to the presidency was navigated partly, perhaps even predominantly, by soothing non-black voters that he grooves to a “killing rhythm.” Killing rhythm is a term Stefano Harney and Fred Moten use to describe a “symphonic trap” that “seeks structure, fixity; it seeks ‘to beat out that rhythm over the undercommon track that keeps its own measure’” (qtd. in Bey 289). I aver to say that killing rhythm is another term for militarized masculinity set to rhythmic force, and sissy critique to be “that indiscretion and fugitivity” that simmers beneath it. Marquis Bey explains, “We are surrounded by rhythms reverberating throughout the vibrations of worldly inhabitation, but the prevailing rhythm, the one that seeks to circumscribe our [(black, trans, sissy,)] para-ontological cacophony, is ... a ‘killing rhythm’” (289). We can see/hear these concurrent tracks played out when it seemed the entire nation turned its attention to the George Zimmerman's acquittal of murder of black teen Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013. In his address to the nation, President Obama spoke to the tune of the killing rhythm: “I know this case has elicited strong

passions. And in the wake of the verdict, I know those passions may be running even higher. But we are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken. We should ask ourselves, as individuals and as a society, how we can prevent future tragedies like this. As citizens, that's a job for all of us" (qtd. in Taylor 150). I'm particularly struck here by the words "laws" and "citizens," because they are presented as if both parties in the case were *seen* and *treated* equally under the law. Yet we know that Martin's body was tested for drugs, but Zimmerman wasn't. We know that the judge instructed both parties that the phrase "racial profiling" was prohibited from being mentioned, and thus could not be part of the prosecutor's strategy. We know that it took 45 days for the police to arrest Zimmerman, and that was because when they arrived on the scene they accepted his account of the events that left Martin. His body was tagged as "John Doe" without efforts to find his family or if he was reported as missing (Taylor 147-149). The asymmetrical approach taken by law enforcement and the juridical system corroborates claims that "there is a dual system of criminal justice—one for African Americans and one for whites" (Taylor 150). The call to reflect on how to prevent future tragedies like this one falls upon "all of us," "[a]s citizens," but here again is the presumption that all citizens are *seen* as such. Clearly Zimmerman could not *see* Martin as a citizen worthy of existing as a young black man walking through the neighborhood: "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something," Zimmerman told the 911 operator (qtd. in Taylor 147). The coded language of race, gender, age, and class, quickly added up to criminality in Zimmerman's imaginary, as well as the police and the jury. To double back, then, if both the law and citizenship centralize power in white supremacy, how will future tragedies

like this one be avoided? The poet Claudia Rankine tells us, “Whiteness cannot support evidence against its own privilege” (“The Art” 149). The (killing) beat goes on.

Community organizer Alicia Garza’s response to the verdict, “#blacklivesmatter,” which she posted to Facebook, became “a powerful rejoinder that spoke directly to the dehumanization and criminalization that made Martin seem suspicious in the first place and allowed the police to make no effort to find out to whom this boy belonged” (Taylor 151). The phrase Black Lives Matter is precisely the poetic force capable of refusing the logic of the killing rhythm—it’s “the undercommon track that remains fugitive from the emerging logistics of this deadly rhythm and will exhaust it” (qtd. in Bey 289). The phrase Black Lives Matter ruptures the notion of citizen Obama invokes in his address to the nation, its hooks’ “black look” or the black queer gesture of “throwing shade.” It refuses the hail of the killing rhythm vis-à-vis Obama’s invocation of “citizens,” and instead demands an examination of the term “citizen” from the interstice of black lives, and those other modes of being in the “alternative groove.”

Claudia Rankine’s 2014 book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a cacophony of lyrical essays, prose poems, visual art, photography, painting, collage, and video (presented frame-by-frame), provides space to take up this question of citizen in relation to blackness. To be sure, Rankine is not interested in answering this question, or any other, for her reader. It’s not so much a meditation on the subject of “citizen” as it is a public engagement, counterintuitive to the notion of the lyric as a private, intimate genre. Rankine describes her formal approach as “an obsessive circling of the subject”:

Many positions are inhabited relative to a line of inquiry. It’s like one of those mirrored rooms where the spectator sees the same thing in different variations and

from different angles. Didn't feel it the first time? Here it is again. We don't get there by saying it once. It's not about telling the story, it's about creating the feeling of *knowing* the story through the accumulation of the recurring moment. ("The Art" 147-148)

The subject being circled throughout the book is blackness, specifically how people of color encounter microaggressions and how their bodies process and store them and their accumulated costs over time. She demands the reader confront, through *seeing* and *feeling*, these microaggressions, for example, through the use of the second-person "You." "You" occupy your window seat on a plane when a girl and her mother arrive, and seeing you, the girl says, "these are our seats, but this is not what I expected," and the mother responds "I see, ... I'll sit in the middle" (*Citizen* 12). "You" get mistakenly called the name of the other black woman in your office, and reflexively laugh because the cliché is too potent not to. Shortly after, an email arrives in your inbox titled "our mistake" and you're made to understand that "Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion" (*Citizen* 43). "You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica," mapping the opaque gap that demands you to rush to meet (*from where? Unknown.*) a friend who you've made to be kept waiting in the affluent white town, and when you arrive, "This friend says ... You are late, you nappy-headed ho" (*Citizen* 41). In each encounter blackness is hyper-visible and invisible, and language hurled at the black body rather than the person "you" are, in a weaponized manner. For Rankine, these experiences, in which meaning builds and multiplies, occur "because whiteness sees itself in a place of dominance, suddenly the racial dynamic comes into play. One benefit of white privilege is that whiteness has an arsenal of

racialized insults at the ready” (“The Art” 148). In your friend’s “nappy-headed ho” utterance, “you” are forced to navigate toward a way of understanding how you came to be addressable in this manner:

What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn’t, perhaps cannot, repeat what she has just said ... For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (*Citizen* 41-42).

“What did you say?” and “what do you mean?” calls for an account for what has been said, to acknowledge the wound wielded through language and to explain why your presence warrants the aggression. Something about the presence of “your” black body signals the utterance, and leaves you both, because you are friends, in the break. The refrain “What did you say?” is the talking back that disallows the moment to pass, an irruptive reckoning that reverses the trajectory of the aggression from object to subject. It’s a strategy that causes discomfort, “it was a joke,” but I read it as a means of escape (toward freedom), like dark sousveillance.

Rankine’s use of the second-person occurs in different sections throughout *Citizen*, and it is never the same “You.” “You” are a black man being pulled over by the police, and, understanding the order of things, open your brief case in the front seat to expedite the search sure to come. “You” are asked indirectly to explain to a mother how her legacy student was denied acceptance to a college due to “affirmative action or

minority something—she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it?" (*Citizen* 13). In this way, her book becomes a field activated by the reader, who is denied a coherent narrative and left instead to *see* and *feel* the anxiety and stress that builds up in the black body. Rankine in part draws from Judith Butler's assertion that language is hurtful because "We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness...is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this" (*Citizen* 49). Meditating on Butler's formulation, Rankine wonders if the racist language is not meant to erase but to make hyper-visible so as to exploit "all the ways in which you are present" (*Citizen* 49). Consider Zimmerman's language characterizing the young black man wearing a hoodie as thug whose up to no good, "on drugs or something." Martin was hyper-visible to Zimmerman and all the ways in which he was present marked him for erasure. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Rankine says, "Often when people are speaking with me, I feel what they are saying is the journey to how they are feeling. I mean, it's not that I'm *not* interested in what they're saying, but I feel like what they're saying is a performance... I realize that the thing that's being said is not the point at all, there's this subterranean exchange of contexts, emotions, and unspoken signals. I think a lot about how white dominance is part of this invisible and unmarked dynamic" ("The Art" 147). In this light, Zimmerman's description of Martin is not an isolated phenomenon but representative of systemic racism that codes and has always coded the black body as suspicious and worthy of fatal force; his assessment of blackness moving through his neighborhood seemed reasonable to the police and to the jury.

Near the end of *Citizen*, Rankine captures the Zimmerman verdict in a two-page spread: the entire left page is blank aside from the date “July 13, 2013,” the right page is another second-person quotidian prose poem depicting a “you” worrying about the confrontation your partner wants to have with a stranger in another car, “who knows what handheld objects the other vehicle carries” (*Citizen* 151). The encounter is banal, just a bit of road rage, common enough, yet the atmosphere *feels* like a tinderbox: “Trayvon Martin’s name sounds from the car radio a dozen times each half hour. You pull your love back into the seat because though no one seems to be chasing you, the justice system has other plans” (*Citizen* 151). The immediate stress of the micro-aggression informs the all-encompassing anxiety of the macro-aggression of state violence. The sonic repetition of Martin’s name grooving to the beat of the killing rhythm, reminding “you” that “you” are suspicious, a target for harm, that killing you is met with immunity: “*Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on*” (*Citizen* 151). And as “you” feel machine pushing cool air toward your body it’s not enough, you’re suffocating: “Despite the air-conditioning you pull the button back and the window slides down into its door-sleeve. A breeze touches your cheek. As something should. (*Citizen* 151). “You” make more room, cut the trapped, recirculating air with a natural breeze, and in that escape, you are met with a small comfort.

I offer up this reading of *Citizen* as a way of thinking about and responding to President Obama’s call for all of us as citizens to make sure the tragedy of Martin’s death does not happen again. By particularly attending to the non-traditional use of the second-person in lyrical poetry, Rankine engages in what Heather Love calls the “politics of the micro,” where “the scaled-down and the micro breaks open the category of ordinary

trouble, suggesting that violence both permeates the social order and is visible frame-by-frame, second by second. *Citizen* shows that attention to the micro-scale is not inherently conservative, that exactitude can be a political resource” (441-442). Indeed, I argue that in a subversive play on the traditional use of the lyrical first-person Rankine has swapped the “I” for an “eye,” demanding the reader to *see* and *feel* from the perspective of blackness. This literary technique grants the reader a more jarring, visceral experience in effect by enacting dark sousveillance—by looking at the aggression from the receiving end and talking back. It also gives up the lie to the mythic “citizens” that Obama hails, and other hails such as “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” in response to Black Lives Matter, and the strategy of labeling Blacks Lives Matter a terrorist organization.

U.S. state violence has been exposed in the WikiLeaks publication of the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs and the Black Lives Matter movement. They reveal the ever-expanding security state via surveillance, immigration bans, border walls, smart technology, and so on serve to protect some (white, cis-heterosexual, homonormative), while simultaneously producing suspect citizens and enemy Others (non-whites, trans, sissies, foreign-born). My analysis of the Chelsea Manning case and reading of *Citizen* situates sissy critique within a matrix of blackness and transness to articulate the making of suspect citizens to be the work of militarized masculinity at this particularly volatile political moment. Thinking through and alongside theory from black feminism, black trans-, and queer of color critique, I suggest that these subjects who are made vulnerable and precarious by state violence and the security state, counter-intuitively appropriate the very means of their oppression in order to formulate radical gestures of *seeing*, *looking*,



and *feeling*. From this vantage, a sissy vantage, envisioning something beyond, better, and more just than militarized masculinity is not just possible, it's already happening.

*Coda: In Moonlight...*

In the final scene of Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), a black boy stands alone on a beach facing the ocean, his back to the camera. The camera slowly pans toward him, drawing our focus to his skin which is catching up all of the light, "In moonlight black boys look blue." And he does look blue. Then, as if called, he turns his head to look over his shoulder. He holds the gaze of something just over the camera—almost looking directly into the lens, but not—for several seconds before the film cuts to the credits. What was he looking at? The viewer sees only him, while he looks back and just over their head. It's an ending that takes us back to the beginning—the turn toward the camera reveals the boy is "Little" (Chiron) from the first act—making circular what appeared to be a linear structure coming-of-age narrative told in three chapters. Seeing "Little" once more before the credits feels lyrical, an invitation to *see* him again in a new light, from a different vantage.

*Moonlight* is a film that is invested in the work of undoing its audience's expectations. It takes place in the Miami neighborhood of Liberty City, which we quickly learn is a poor, black community amidst the tropical paradise. Here, the drug trade is boss, as the film addresses with the mutually dependent relationship (addict/dealer) of its characters Paula, Juan, and Teresa. The housing is rundown or abandoned, syringes and broken glass litter the sidewalks which bake in the south Florida sun. Audiences may not have seen Liberty City on screen before, but they've surely seen this kind of "inner-city" represented in popular culture, news media, and school. A majority of Americans have

been conditioned to believe places like Liberty City are where suspect citizens reside, where criminality is the norm, and lazy people live off entitlements—all weaponized language deployed against black communities largely under the guise of the “war on drugs.” As a result, these neighborhoods become virtual open-air prisons, restricting movement through heavy policing and various other forms of racism. But when watching *Moonlight*, the anxiety of violence doesn’t come primarily from these outside forces. Instead, it’s the threat of masculinity, specifically a “hard” masculinity, that makes Chiron first run from danger.

The lyrical play on hard and soft masculinity corresponds with Chiron’s proximity to water. In the first chapter, “Little,” young Chiron is taken to the beach by Juan, who holds him in the ocean teaching him how to swim and float. When back on shore, Juan shares stories from his childhood in Cuba, talking to Chiron who listens intently and speaks mostly with his eyes rather than using words. Juan, the Afro-Cuban immigrant drug-dealer, never imparts the need to “be hard,” a lesson Chiron’s peers give him through chases and beatings. Rather, Juan is calm, caring, and open with Chiron, so much so that it’s to Juan that Chiron asks, “What’s a faggot?” and “Am I a faggot?” Coincidentally, in the third chapter, “Black,” the adult version of Chiron has fashioned himself in Juan’s image. He’s “build [himself] hard,” literally with a muscular physique (the opposite of his tall, thin teenage body in the “Chiron” chapter) wearing a gold grill in his mouth, gold chain, and makes a living as a dealer in Atlanta. He is called back to the water via Kevin, the only man to ever touch him “like that.” Kevin and Chiron, as high-schoolers, have a sexual encounter when sharing a blunt on the beach at night. Kevin is also the one who warns “Little” to show the other boys he’s “hard” in order to stop them

from bothering him. Juan, Kevin, and Chiron all perform masculinity in different ways, but it's particularly when they're near water that the performance of gender falls away and they can open up, become addressable and vulnerable—to *see*, and *feel*, and *touch*. We get this moment at the end of the film, just before we return to “Little” on the beach, Kevin holds Chiron in an embrace, stroking his head and pulling him close, as the sound of waves spill in through the open window.

Jenkins and co-writer Tarell Alvin McCraney both grew up in Liberty City and both had mothers who were addicted to crack, much like Chiron and Paula (his mother). Their collaboration is one that comes from a deep understanding of and care for the place they depict and send out to the world, and it's a collaborative point-of-view from black (Jenkins) and black queer experience (McCraney). In *Moonlight*, Jenkins has his characters flowing to and from the water and their community in Liberty City, extending and mapping new and different coordinates for “suspect citizens.” When Chiron is dealt the hard blows for being a “soft boy” in a tough place the bright sunlight is beating down in Liberty City, like the killing rhythm demanding he get in line, man up, get hard. Here the audience recognizes the environment and in that recognition are confronted with their own complicity within this oppression. Rather than end with the scene of embrace, signaling that Chiron has found some peace, the viewer is brought back to “Little” at night, in the soft moonlight, at the shore where water meets land and movement is fluid, “it's like all you can feel is your own heartbeat... feels so good.” In the closing shot, the camera's (our) gaze is locked on “Little,” who from his vantage, looks back and beyond.

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