

Bloody Translations: The Politics of International Compassion and Horror

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Abstract: We live in a world where machetes and meat cleavers are considered savage and horrific, while atom bombs and drone strikes are deemed to be civilized, legitimate, or acceptable methods of waging large-scale violence. How is this possible? This essay engages this distinction by tracing the ways in which what is deemed normative violence is narrated and theorized by, for, and in the 'West.' I hone in on specific instances and moments within larger contexts of violence such as World War II, The Vietnam War, and the Global War on Terror, and follow Muppidi (2012) in asking what translation practices enable the reading of various kinds of bodily injury as progressive, civilized, or legitimate. Doing so enables me to show the important role that the racialization of affect plays in the production of this distinction.

I.

It was impossible to avoid the boy with the biscuit for a few days. His image was in my email, on the web, and the subject of conversations with family, friends, and colleagues. He sits, shirtless and hunched, on a wooden bench in front of a stack of green sandbags, eating a biscuit. A checked sarong thoughtfully draped over his back, the boy's eyes gaze into the distance to his left. He appears to be lost in thought. His cheeks are chubby. I cannot see his legs below the knees, but I can imagine them swinging impatiently. His face and posture suggest a certain restlessness – the kind that an impatient young boy who has been asked to sit against his will might have. The kind of restlessness that might possess a boy when a parent has interrupted his game of cricket and told him to sit down and have his snack. A boy impatient to get back to his cricket, but unwilling to disobey parental authority.

I had met him before – in that earlier image, he lies on the ground. His eyes are closed and his shoulders are hunched. He is shirtless and wearing the same pair of shorts. Even before my eyes travel to the tiny perforations in his torso I know that there is no life in this body. The body is bloated. And there is something about his body, something that I cannot put into words, that tells me that he is not asleep. The ground around him is mud cracked – sun-baked and foot-trodden clayey soil that does not allow for roots to breathe or grow.

The boy is not any boy. He is 12-year-old Balachandran Prabhakaran, son of Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The images testify to the boy's capture and subsequent execution by the Sri Lankan military during the final moments of its defeat of the LTTE. The images taken in Mullivaikal now circulate globally from London courtesy of Channel 4 news.¹ While it is unclear as to whether the images originated as trophy-

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photos or as indictments, they circulate globally as “shock-pictures.”² The text accompanying the image of the boy in the bunker is unequivocal about the meaning of the boy’s death: He was not killed in battle, or in crossfire, it says. Instead, he was murdered in a deliberate manner. Ergo, it is an atrocity. The text hints at other pictures - more evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity. As I scan the words accompanying the two images, I see that the two images released almost a year apart, function as both advocacy and advertisement. They are released ahead of the annual general meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva (2012 and 2013 respectively) and also advertise the impending screening of two documentaries on the subject by Channel 4 news.³

The boy’s arrival disrupts my life. This is not the first body I have come across. It is not even the first boy-body. There have been so many bodies before this one. So many boys, girls, men, and women. But there is something about this boy -- something about this gaze, the arrested motion, and most of all that biscuit -- that grabs hold of me, insisting on a response. What is it about this boy, that is different from the tens of thousands of others who have gone before him, I wonder? Why him? Why now? And, what might he want of me?

This encounter with Balachandran makes me wonder: Given that international relations, as Himadeep Muppidi observes, “is littered with dead and dying bodies,”⁴ how is it that some deaths register as worthy of indignation, justice and compassion, while others pass by, unmourned and unnoticed? Why do some killings evoke horror while others are deemed legitimate, acceptable, or even welcome?

Unable to forget those chubby cheeks and swinging legs, but unwilling to expose myself to more disquiet, I prevaricate by doing nothing. However, after a while, I muster up the necessary fortitude and watch the investigative documentary, *Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished*, to learn what happened to the boy.⁵ Steeling myself, I watch the movie. The boy is enjoined by other bodies. Dead bodies. Dying bodies. Naked bodies. Grieving bodies. Many of them captured in real-time on video. These are not anybodies. These are not foreign bodies. These are bodies that lament and mourn the dead and the dying in my mother tongue. These are bodies dying at home. My stomach churns.

All kinds of undisciplined questions fire away within me as I watch: “Did the hand that feed the boy also pull the trigger? What was the boy feeling as he ate that biscuit?”

**My heartfelt thanks to Elizabeth Dauphinee, Aparna Devare, Naeem Inayatullah, Emma Kast, Akta Kaushal, Charles Mills, Himadeep Muppidi, Reina Neufeldt and Andrew Vorhees for their generous and insightful engagement with various iterations of this piece.

¹ Callum Macrae, “Sri Lanka: A Child is Summarily Executed,” *The Independent*, March 11, 2012, accessed May 21, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/sri-lanka-a-child-is-summarily-executed-7555062.html>;

Callum Macrae, “The Killing of a Young Boy,” *The Hindu*, February 19, 2013, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-killing-of-a-young-boy/article4428792.ece>.

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 9.

³ Advocacy and advertisement go hand-in-hand as the articles refer to and are released just ahead of the documentary screenings, which themselves are shown in the lead-up to the annual meetings in Geneva.

⁴ Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.

⁵ “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished,” first broadcast March 14, 2012 on Channel 4, directed by Callum Macrae, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-killing-fields/4od#3321899>.

“What did the killers think/feel as they killed? Were they making the son pay for the sins of the father? And what was the boy thinking as he gazed to his left? What did he think of his father’s love of/for the nation?”

And even more difficult, “what would this boy want of me? Can I give him what he asks of me?”

*I died with the white flag at Mullivaikal
 I who controlled one-fourth of the teardrop
 I who countenanced fear not only in the island but beyond
 I died the way I lived
 Killing part of the self
 Fighting genocide
 Mutilating self
 We learnt our missionary lessons well didn't we?
 After all, we are a studious people, aren't we?*

The documentary does not speak to my unvoiced questions. Its concern is elsewhere. It is designed to stage and answer the questions: “Were these deaths a violation of international law?” Do these deaths constitute an instance of War Crimes? Of Crimes Against Humanity? The narrative is structured in the form of a legal argument. A parade of experts moves the boy-body’s case along: one pronounces the images to be authentic; another speaks to the forensics of angles and distance; and a third, to the dictates of international law. Where necessary, expertise is buttressed by victim testimony. The testimony dutifully affirms the argument. The argument is simple and the implication clear: death by execution, we need an international investigation. I cannot fail to notice the parsimonious and rigorous execution of argument and the marshalling of scientific evidence to produce a valid claim – after all, isn’t this what I train my students to master, when I teach theories of international relations?

Why then does this materialization of the international feel like a violation? Is it because the international is not elsewhere but home? Is it because the coloured body that is the object of my putatively colour-free international theoretical languages is not that of a distant darker Other but my very own reflection? From the perspective of a minority Self beleaguered by a majoritarian Other, the moment of humanitarian/human rights concern is no doubt a welcome act of care in an often self-interested international. But why does this act of concern take this form? Why the prurient parade of naked violated brown bodies? Why do these brown bodies appear only as object-victims to be saved but not as speaking subjects?⁶ Why do they only confirm, affirm the international but never speak to it?

Archiving “The Killing Fields”

The parade of the dead, the dying, and the grieving is not confined to the *Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished*. It continues, even multiplies, in two other documentaries, both screened by Channel 4.⁷ Even before I click on the second movie, I cannot but not notice the

⁶ Himadeep Muppidi, *Colonial Signs*; Makau Mutua, “Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 42:1, 2001, 201-245.

⁷ “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields” and “No Fire Zone,” dir. Callum Macrae.

repeated analogy being drawn through the title. Elsewhere on Channel 4's webpage dedicated to atrocities in Sri Lanka, I see another analogy being drawn – this time to Srebrenica.⁸ A sphere of “genocide” begins to take shape from the Far East to the East on the West's doorstep. I wonder if ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) will now be followed by ICTSL.

Again, I am speechless and sick. I am outraged by what I view. Sitting in my living room, my son's baby monitor next to me, I watch three bound and blindfolded boys being shot to death.⁹ I keep watching as an unseen soldier berates another for not having the balls to shoot a captive. “Are you afraid of even an unarmed Tiger?” the voice asks the other, alluding to the fear and fascination that the LTTE evoked during its almost quarter-century long armed struggle for a Thamil nation-state. Another soldier makes sure that a buddy gets his corpse (photo) shot taken. Not only does he take the photo, he adjusts his comrade's helmet so that it does not hide part of his face. The touch of concern for aesthetics is jarring.

If the bodies wail/call to me in my mother tongue, the killings are in the name of my motherland. Assailed by conflicting emotions, experiences, and affiliations, my voice falters. I ask, “Why must Sri Lankan sovereignty and security be written so bloodily on the body of the Thamil? Why does war require not only the out-injuring of the Tiger¹⁰ but also ‘its’ abjection?¹¹ Is the execution, the rape an attempt to purge oneself of one's own fear of the Tiger? Given the fear and fascination of the Tiger in the popular imagination, are these acts a perverse way of convincing the self that the feared Tiger is also a sentient being? But these academic questions cannot mask the disorientation that comes from being both victim and perpetrator.

*My Sinhala brother
You killed me
In the name of self-preservation
In the name of territory
In the name of the holy
In the name of peace*

A group of women shelter in a bunker in the midst of a shell attack, imploring the cameraman, “no, don't take the video ... what are you going to do with it?”¹² The camera continues filming, the anonymous cameraman silent. The narrator does not comment on the women's objections. “No means No” does not apply to the humanitarian. So the image survives, circulates. But did the women? As I gaze at this archive, this archive that was made over the objections of these women, I find myself being asked: “What are *you* going to do with this?”

⁸ “Killing Fields video evidence ‘builds case for war crimes,’” Channel 4 News, accessed March 07, 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/killing-fields-video-evidence-builds-case-for-war-crimes>.

⁹ “Sri Lanka's Killing Fields,” <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-killing-fields/on-demand/51949-001>

¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 69.

¹¹ On meaning being established against the meaninglessness of the abject, see Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹² “Sri Lanka's Killing Fields.”

The UN humanitarian workers are about to leave the war zone, having been ordered to leave by the UN when the Sri Lankan government refused to guarantee their safety. Tens of hands appear through the grille of the barred gate of the UN compound begging the workers to stay. Remarkably, none of the voices that belong to the arms ask to be taken with the workers. Perhaps they know that it is impossible – they know better than to ask. That kind of mobility is afforded only to killers and carers. In response, one of the UN workers runs his camera across the grille documenting the imploring hands. And in turn, we (the viewers) get to see one more instance of the archive being made over the hands/voices/bodies of those about to be killed. Some bodies take pictures; others have their pictures taken. Why? How? Why is it that the hand that documents is unable to clasp the hand that is offered? What kind of international would allow the brown hand to be clasped and the brown voice to be spoken with, rather than documented, displayed, and spoken about?

And so it is, again, bodies over there. Nothing but bodies; displayed bodies; speechless bodies; bodies that are allowed to speak only when answering our questions; bodies that deserve only our care and compassion but not a response. The killers kill, the carers show, and I/we watch. I am victim and perpetrator, watcher and watched. What is the politics of this closed circle?

The Caring International Self

Just like Sontag's "shock-picture," the simple, almost self-evident narrative structure of human rights/humanitarian reports/appeals is not meant for the likes of me. It is designed to galvanize some mixture of guilt, concern, and compassion in an otherwise apathetic, distant, uninterested, and perhaps even overwhelmed western spectator and move him/her to do something to make the world a better place. Click a button, wear a wristband, attend a protest, or better yet, become an activist. Hence, "[h]ere's the law; here's the situation; here's the proof that this instance is a violation of law; ergo, case closed. Now do something ... !" As Stanley Cohen notes, [human rights/humanitarian] narrative is not simply about documentation, but also simultaneously an act of advocacy.¹³

Sympathetic critics have pointed out that the structuring of the narrative as a simple morality play erases complexity and context.¹⁴ But the archiver/advocate responds that, absent a Manichean dichotomy, the western spectator may not be galvanized into action.¹⁵ The innocence of the victim and the guilt of the killer have to be absolute and unequivocal. So, the carer turns to affect rather than to knowledge. Hence the parade of the dying, the dead, the naked, the grieving. Hence the refrain of "genocide."

I wonder what the turn to affect says about the care proponents and their intended audience. The human rights/humanitarian project's universalizability is predicated upon it being based on reason. In the age of reason, every individual has certain inalienable rights. This truth is universal and hence has to be and can be universalized. Yet, the humanitarian turn to affect suggests that reason is not, or cannot be, devoid of affect. Isn't this why care, compassion, guilt,

¹³ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 196-221; Claire Moon, "What One Sees and How One Files: Human Rights Reporting, Representation and Action," *Sociology* 46:5, 2012, 877.

¹⁴ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); Moon, "What One Sees."

¹⁵ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial*, 187-195.

and apathy are at the forefront of advocacy rather than complexity and context? Isn't this why the investigative documentaries construe atrocity in relation to international law rather than in relation to the contested histories, visions, and subjectivities that constitute the so-called Sri Lankan 'ethnic conflict?' For if the rationale for the universalization of human rights is so self-evident and based on reason, then why does the humanitarian fear reason in the form of complexity and context? Why turn to affect? After all, why not persuade the western spectator through reason? Of course, one could respond by saying I am assuming the western spectator is a reasonable/reasoned/reasoning subject. I concede. But, if the western spectator is not (yet) made over by the rule of reason, then is it reasonable to assume that reason really is universal? I find myself having to choose between concluding a) that the western spectator is not reasoned; b) that the human rights/humanitarian project is not based on reason; or c) neither the western spectator nor the humanitarian is reasoned. The humanitarian victim, like the primitive, has body but no voice¹⁶; biology but no biography.¹⁷ Compassion responds to corpses and wounds but does not recognize human beings.

Killing Fields of Impunity

Despite the efforts of the newsmakers, documentarians, and humanitarians to always locate the killings fields elsewhere, I find myself thinking of lighter-skinned killers urinating on corpses, wearing ear-bead necklaces and posing for corpse photos. Unable to find them in the archives of international humanitarian law or of international human rights, I have to turn to "history" to find them. And when I find these killers in the archive, they begin to speak to me.

Lieutenant William L. ("Rusty") Calley felt no remorse for the atrocities committed by the soldiers Charlie Company upon entering the village of Son My. He asks, "What the hell else is war than killing people?" He is puzzled by the fuss made about the pre-lunch sodomizing, raping, scalping, bayoneting, and shooting of unarmed civilians that he and his company engaged in on 16 March 1968: "I knew that war's wrong. Killing's wrong. I realized. I had gone to a war, though. I had killed, but I knew *So did a million others* [sic]. I sat there and I couldn't find the key. I pictured the people of My Lai: the bodies and they didn't bother me. I had found, I had closed with, I had destroyed the VC: the mission that day. I thought, I couldn't be wrong or I'd have remorse about it."¹⁸ The soldiers, as Calley contends, were following orders. "We knew we were supposed to kill everyone in the village," concurs William Calvin Lloyd recalling the briefing the day before the attack when his company had been taunted for allowing "men, women, or children, or other VC soldiers in the area" to flee.¹⁹

For the soldiers, everyone in their sights was VC, an enemy. "The old men, the women, the children – the babies – were all VC or would be VC in about three years. And inside of VC women, there were a thousand little VCs now."²⁰ When looked through the scope, the face of the

¹⁶ David Spur, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 22-25.

¹⁷ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 254. The distinction is Hannah Arendt's and speaks to the silencing of the victims' narrative of what befell them.

¹⁸ Quoted in Joanna Bourke, *Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 171-172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

Other, is always “the Gook”, “the Native.” This is not an atrocity. This is not the view of killers alone but also of their citizenry. When the conviction of Calley for premeditated murder was announced, “flags were flown at half-mast in state capitals” and “President Nixon received over 100,000 letters and telegrams within twenty-four hours of the announcement” calling for Calley’s release. When Calley was released upon the president’s commutation of his sentence to house arrest, “the House of Representatives applauded.”²¹ This is not an atrocity.

Calley was originally charged with the premeditated murder of Oriental human beings.²² This is not an atrocity.

I don’t consider Calley’s puzzlement an indictment of his lack of humanity. Instead, it offers a clue that “My Lai” was “not an aberration but an operation.”²³ It was one of hundreds of American massacres in Vietnam. Massacres complemented by the dropping of an equivalent of 640 Hiroshima-sized bombs.²⁴ Massacres compounded by racist illiteracy.²⁵ Massacres denied by the dissemblance of a pervasive infrastructure of covering up.²⁶

To me “Vietnam” does not offer a lesson about failed counter-insurgency or American might. Instead, it reveals the limit of the supposedly universal world of humanitarian compassion. While able to travel great distances, this compassion does not extend to “gooks” in “backward”, “piddling little piss-ant countries.”²⁷ Vietnam is a lesson to darker peoples – we do not commit atrocities when we put you in your place. Our bombs and bayonets do not violate international law. Of course.

Compassionate Killings

Eric Stover’s, *The Witnesses*, is a superbly researched and monumental work that seeks to understand the complex motivations of witnesses who testified at the International Criminal Trials for the former Yugoslavia trials at The Hague.²⁸ The most fascinating and revealing aspect of the book for me lies not so much in the rich interview data or in Stover’s critical appraisal of the functioning and success of the ICTY, but rather in an anecdote in the preface through which Stover conveys how he came to his study.

In the preface, Stover narrates an encounter with a group of Muslim women about what they had survived in Srebrenica. In translating the women as “Muslim” and the issue at hand as “Srebrenica”, Stover firmly establishes the terms of the encounter as one involving the victims of a genocide. While having tea with the women, Stover describes how when he introduced the topic of the international criminal court, he was surprised to find that some of the elderly women were not supportive of the court’s mission. One of them angrily asks, “Why should I care about *that* (emphasis in original) court? ... My husband and sons! Where are they? That’s what I want

²¹ Ibid., 194.

²² Ibid., 205.

²³ Ron Ridenhour quoted in Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 5.

²⁴ Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg (New York: The New Press, 2001), 163.

²⁵ “Gook” was previously used by the American military to denote Filipinos and Nicaraguans during its respective occupations of these two places.

²⁶ On this see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*.

²⁷ This was how President Lyndon B. Johnson saw Vietnam. Ibid., 49.

²⁸ Eric Stover, *The Witnesses* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

to know!” Another woman queries, “This court. This UN *court*? ... *Where* (both emphases in original) was it when the Serbs took our men away?”²⁹

Stover is flabbergasted because he (like many people, he says) had assumed that “survivors of horrific crimes wanted [the] perpetrators [of these deeds] tried publicly in a court of law.”³⁰ Stover is reflective enough to account for his assumption, which he says stems from his experience in “the 1980s and 1990s [when he] had accompanied dozens of forensic and medical teams to some of the world’s worst killing fields and spoken to countless families of genocide and ethnic cleansing.”³¹ Most of the people he had encountered during this work while yearning to have the remains of their loved ones properly buried had also been adamant that those responsible for their crimes be held responsible.

I do not wish to quibble with Stover’s experience, expertise, or commitment to human rights. Stover is no fly-by-the-night westerner who pronounces himself or is valorized as an expert on the basis of quickies into non-western places. What I wish to underscore is the equivalence that Stover draws between the “victim’s” desire for accountability and the legal means for doing so. I wonder why it is that someone with so much experience and expertise in human rights could not plausibly understand that a particular human being might find the law wanting in its ability to provide redress, or even find the motivations of the law to be suspicious given its selective timing and applicability. Or, that a mother might be more concerned about her son (whether he was alive, what happened to him) than about punishing the perpetrator. What does this conflation between desire and law tell us about the humanity of the human rights expert?

What I find even more problematic is Stover’s response. Flabbergasted by the two women’s responses, he does not pursue a conversation with the two women who were so passionately opposed to the international criminal justice system. Why does he does not attempt to converse with them? He seems uninterested in understanding what conceptions of justice/accountability they might find satisfactory. He is unconcerned with what they want. Instead, he tracks down two younger women who had slipped out of the room during that encounter, in a bid to get them to explain (“translate”) to him why it is that the women said what they did. Stover does not tell us why he tracked *these* two women. He does not tell us why he did not ask someone else. The two women tell him that the older women’s opposition comes from the fact that engaging in the pursuit of justice means giving up hope that their men were still alive. Having satisfied his curiosity, Stover goes on to state, “My encounters with the Srebrenica women that summer made me wonder what motivated people to testify about their great personal losses.”³²

I wonder which of the Srebrenica women he is referring to when he says this. Is he referring to the ones he tracked down to translate? Or is he referring to the two older women who scorned the adequacy of international criminal justice? Why does Stover not engage the radical skepticism of the adequacy of the UN court offered by these women? Perhaps he can do so, because he is, after all, not accountable to them. They cannot call him – an academic, an international human rights expert, an activist – to account. And for his part, he seems uninterested

²⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, xi.

in the concrete human beings with whom he is engaged – an encounter initiated by Stover’s desire. He holds himself accountable to the (international) law and the abstract human being that anchors it.³³

Not only does Stover the expert neutralize the radical difference opened up by the conversation, but with this move he creates that much sought after magic of the social scientist. He produces a puzzle, “what motivates people to come forward as witnesses to The Hague?” Here we have social science, human rights, and international justice and accountability all materializing hand-in-hand. Stover the expert neutralizes the possibility of radical difference by depoliticizing the two older women’s opposition as arising from “personal losses” rather than from a well thought historical-political assessment of their predicament.³⁴ What would it mean to regard these women’s suspicions as those of a generation that has experienced WWII, the genocide in the 1940s, the construction of the Socialist Federation and the pride of non-aligned Yugoslavia? What would it mean to consider that these women’s opposition stems from their suspicion of “European” motives in Bosnia? That they suspect the courts had more to do with assuaging injured European pride than with dispensing justice?

Abstract universal victims are created in the shadow of the international criminal court by the expert’s personalization and neutralization of potentially dissenting viewpoints. Depoliticizing the historical-political views of bystanders, perpetrators, and survivors effaces the historicity of violations of bodily integrity, strips them of other determinations, and subsumes them squarely under the category of crime (war crimes and crimes against humanity).

Beyond Object-Victims

Even as I attempt to ask myself what I might owe to the boy with the biscuit, another boy of roughly the same age flits into my mind. Try as I might, I cannot remember his face. Living in Batticaloa, he was abducted on the way to school by the liberators/Tigers to train as a fighter. After a long and trying process, his mother was finally able to trace him to a training camp further north. However, when she entreated the camp commandant to let him go, he refused her request on the grounds that “a mother’s love diminishes the boy’s love for the motherland.”³⁵ Here a mother and her son pay for the love of the nation. And what of a father’s love for his son and/or his nation? Does the son have to pay for it? There, the son with the biscuit pays for the father’s love for the nation.

“Kamalan” is yet another boy who comes to mind. Kamalan’s older brother is a captain in the liberation movement. Young Kamalan watches as his brother repeatedly stubs a cigarette into the breasts of the “other”. The memory is seared into his brain and it comes upon him unbidden. He cannot forget that “torture” (his term), he says. Now grown up, Kamalan is a peace activist, and he narrates this story as I tell him that I am ambivalent about going on a citizen solidarity/fact-finding trip to Batticaloa. “I don’t want to be yet another tourist,” I tell him. “You must go and experience things for yourself,” he replies.³⁶

³³ On what it might mean to be accountable to concrete human beings in the context of atrocity, see Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (London: Routledge, 2013).

³⁴ I am grateful to Elizabeth Dauphinee for this insight.

³⁵ This conversation occurred in June 2004. More can be found at <http://www.lankademocracy.org/documents/batticolleative.html>.

³⁶ This conversation occurred in Colombo in May 2004.

Why did the captain do what he did in front of his brother? By making him watch, was the captain initiating his brother into the realities of the love of the nation? Or, was it also a warning about the price paid for this love? What did that woman feel? That woman, whose only crime, according to Kamalan, was inhabiting the ‘wrong’ homeland. A woman who not only had to be made homeless in order for the homeland to be produced, but also had to have the homeland indelibly burned on her breasts. I never found the words to ask Kamalan how he remembers his brother. How might I be responsible to Kamalan, his brother, the unnamed woman, the boy and his mother, together with Balachandran?

*The boy with the biscuit
awaiting his fate
Reminds me of yet another boy
watching his brother
Cruelly tattoo those breasts
with a cigarette butt
In the name of sovereignty
disguised as freedom
A boy who would fight for peace
but who would know no peace
Who mourns
who remembers that boy?
Not I.*

Mothers and Sons

When asked by Studs Terkel, Paul Tibbets, the pilot who dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima had this to say about terrorists and what to do with them.³⁷ Tibbets says that he would not hesitate to wipe them out. He says that it will kill innocent people, but there’s never been a war where innocent people have not been killed. “That’s their tough luck for being there.”³⁸ While I am not sure who the “they” he’s referring to in the last line are, and find his candor somewhat distasteful, at least he does not deny some kind of impermeable difference between “us” and “them.” We could very well have been them, he says. There is a recognition here, not of higher and lower beings,³⁹ but of the circumstances of life that shape lives into “them” and “us.” There is here an absence of denial about the close relation between our terror and theirs. There is an acknowledgement that we, too, are out to out-injure our adversaries. That is war. And terror is an integral part of war. He does not contrive the illusion of terror-less wars when it comes to civilians.

Paul Tibbets did not see his love for his mother as being separate from or in conflict with his love for his motherland. He fused the two brilliantly, by naming his plane, that death machine, the *Enola Gay*, after her. I wonder what kind of woman she was. Was she proud of her son and of

³⁷ Studs Terkel, “One hell of a big bang,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2002, accessed November 7, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/aug/06/nuclear.japan>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2004).

his naming his aircraft after her? Or did she, despite her love for her son, also have some space for acknowledging all those other children and mothers over there, who would be incinerated in an instant if they were lucky, or end up crawling around with peeling skin, dehydrated, yet unable to drink any water?

Here is Tibbets' response in the interview published on Hiroshima Day in 2002: "Well, I can only tell you what my dad said. My mother never changed her expression very much about anything, whether it was serious or light, but when she'd get tickled, her stomach would jiggle. My dad said to me that when the telephone in Miami rang, my mother was quiet first. Then, when it was announced on the radio, he said: "You should have seen the old gal's belly jiggle on that one."⁴⁰

Like Enola Gay, Major "Vanessa Meyer" of the US Air Force also does not see her love of the nation stand in the way of the love of a mother. A drone pilot who had her first child while actively flying drones out of the Creech base near Las Vegas, she and her husband (also a drone pilot) don't discuss work at home. But, despite this, "she wants to show [her two small children] 'that mommy can get to work and do a good job.' She doesn't want to be like the women in Afghanistan she watched -- submissive and covered from head to toe. 'The women there are no warriors.'"⁴¹

II.

On October 14, 2011, an American drone strike killed 16-year-old Abdulrahman al-Awlaki as he sat with his teenaged cousin and at least five other boys eating dinner at an open air restaurant in Yemen. A little more than a month before, the boy snuck out of the family home in Sana early one morning. Learning that his father was on an American kill list because of his affiliation with Al Qaeda, the boy had set out to find him, presumably before the Americans did. The boy left a note for his mother asking her to forgive him for leaving without permission. The boy's father, Anwar al-Awlaki, was killed two weeks before the boy's murder – before the boy could catch up with him. Abdulrahman was reportedly saying goodbye to a relative and to some friends he had met during his search when the attack occurred.⁴²

Abdulrahman's grandfather, in an op-ed to *The New York Times*, emphasizes that his grandson is not a terrorist but an American. Born in Denver, Abdulrahman sported a "mop of curly hair ... and a wide, goofy smile," and was a typical teenager [who] watched 'The Simpsons,' listened to Snoop Dogg, read 'Harry Potter' and had a Facebook page with many friends."⁴³ While I understand the grandfather's grief and admire his determination to get the American government to explain why it killed one of its own citizens, I am nevertheless struck by his need to prove the boy's "American" credentials. In its establishment of an equivalence between Abdulrahman's "American-ness" and innocence, Nassar al-Awlaki's petition seems to

⁴⁰ Studs Terkel, "One hell of a big bang."

⁴¹ Nicola Abé, "Dreams in Infrared: The Woes of an American Drone Operator," *Spiegel Online International*, December 14, 2012, accessed November 8, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/pain-continues-after-war-for-american-drone-pilot-a-872726-3.html>

⁴² Tom Junod, "Obama's Administration Killed a 16-year-old American and Didn't Say Anything About This. Is this Justice?" *Esquire*, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/politics/abdulrahman-al-awlaki-death-10470891>.

⁴³ Nassar al-Awlaki, "The Drone that Killed my Grandson," *New York Times*, July 17, 2013, accessed March 8, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/opinion/the-drone-that-killed-my-grandson.html?_r=0.

be saying “we have successfully internalized your values; we are typically American and therefore not terrorists.”

In response President Obama, who had publicly characterized the decision to sign off on what amounted to the elder al-Awlaki’s death warrant as an “easy one”,⁴⁴ was silent about whether the decision to kill the son was similarly effortless. In fact, the government remained quiet about the boy’s death in the face of domestic criticism about the legality of the killing given the boy’s U.S. citizenship. It was only in May 2013, in the face of continued pressure, that the U.S. government acknowledged killing him. The admission came in a letter addressed to the Senate Commission on the Judiciary by Attorney General Eric Holder. The letter provides the committee information on the “number of U.S. citizens killed by U.S. counterterrorism outside of areas of active hostilities”⁴⁵ and is part of a wider effort by the administration to display public accountability. The letter goes on to state:

Since 2009, the United States, in the conduct of U.S. counterterrorism operations against al-Qai’da and its associated forces outside of areas of active hostilities, has specifically targeted and killed, one U.S. citizen, Anwar al-Aulaqi. The United States is further aware of three other U.S. citizens who have been killed in such U.S. counterterrorism operations over that same time period: Samir Khan, Abd al-Rahman Anwar al-Aulaqi, and Jude Kennan Mohammed. These individuals were not specifically targeted by the United States.⁴⁶

The rest of the letter goes on to explain and defend the decision to target and kill Anwar al-Awlaki, but remains silent about the other three killings.

The implication, at least as I see it, is that the other three U.S. citizens (note that there is nothing about one of them being a 16-year-old) were collateral damage. I take the silence to also mean that the Attorney General was confident that none of the elected representatives of the people would interrogate the government about why these lives were taken. While I am fairly certain that the esteemed representatives and the government would both insist that they understand collateral damage to mean “accidental”, I cannot help thinking that collateral also means “subsidiary” or “secondary.” Does the lack of accountability on the part of the government and/or the lack of curiosity or mourning on the part of the elected representatives speak to the value that they attached to these lives: not primary, but rather secondary?

Bad Fathers

One exception to the executive and legislative silence came in the form of senior advisor to President Obama and former White House Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs. Gibbs was queried by reporter Sierra Adamson, who wanted to know how it was possible for an American citizen, and

⁴⁴ Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will”, *New York Times* May 29, 2012, accessed March 8, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

⁴⁵ The document can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/05/23/us/politics/23holder-drone-letter.html>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

an underage one at that, to be targeted without due process or trial.⁴⁷ Before, I move on to Mr. Gibbs' answer, I am struck by the line of questioning about the boy's death. There is no mention of war crimes here. There is no mention of the killing of a non-combatant as a transgression of the laws of civilized warfare. The boy-body in this case does not materialize as an abstract human being but rather as one of "us" (fellow nationals). The laws and procedures that are invoked are not of the international, but of the national.

Gibbs responds to the query by justifying the killing in the following manner: "I would suggest that you have a far more responsible father if they [sic] are truly concerned about the well being of their children. I don't think al Qaeda jihadist terrorist is the best way to go about doing your business."⁴⁸

Here, the boy Abdulrahman does not materialize as an American, as an individual, but instead is invoked as the son of a misguided and terrorist father. He is defined by his blood, his DNA. Gibbs' response is a reminder of the line separating "us" from "them", however much the latter may have tried to remake himself in the image of the former. Abdulrahman's filiation trumps his affinity for Facebook, Snoop Dogg, The Simpsons, and Harry Potter. Anwar al-Awlaki is a terrorist and he is a failure at the "business" of being a father; a legal transgressor and a moral failure. Fighting terrorism is not simply about defending ourselves from those who try to bring destruction to American shores from afar, but also about teaching recalcitrant fathers how to be good ones.

The materialization of Abdulrahman as the son of a terrorist is not the only noteworthy aspect of Mr. Gibbs' response. I keep thinking what Gibbs might have meant by "doing your business." Given that the journalist was not allowed to pose further questions, I feel compelled to think further about this. Perhaps Gibbs meant that the elder al-Awlaki should have indicated his dissent through the electoral market place that is procedural democracy. After all, we can choose waterboarding and renditions on the one hand and signature drone strikes on children on the other, right? I wonder if this is the lesson that the elder al-Awlaki failed to teach his son. Or perhaps Gibbs meant that the proper business of being a citizen in one of the world's most advanced democracies, one that constantly and ceaselessly exports democracies and teaches democratization all over the world, entailed acting as *homo economicus*. Exercise your freedom and dissent through consumer choice.

While Gibbs' sentiments are distasteful to say the least, I for one salute his candour compared to the responses of the elected representatives of the American people with regard to the killing of civilians. When asked about the legality of the signature strike drone program, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz responded by saying that she had never heard of it.⁴⁹ On the other hand, during the confirmation hearings of John Brennan, Rep. Dianne Feinstein stated that the drone killings of civilians were fewer than ten in a given year.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ We Are Change, "Obama's Top Adviser Robert Gibbs Justifies Murder of 16 Year Old American Citizen," YouTube Video, 3:25, October 23, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MwB2znBZ1g>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ Glenn Greenwald, "The remarkable, unfathomable ignorance of Debbie Wasserman Schultz," *The Guardian*, October 20, 2012, accessed November 8, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/20/wasserman-schultz-kill-list>.

⁵⁰ Conor Friedersdorf, "Dianne Feinstein's Outrageous Underestimate of Civilian Drone Deaths," *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2013, accessed November 8, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/dianne-feinsteins-outrageous-underestimate-of-civilian-drone-deaths/273035/>.

Chivalrous Killers

Watching the images of the bombing of Baghdad prompts Max Boot to remember another bombing: the March 9, 1945 bombing of Tokyo in which more than 300 B-29 bombers rained down napalm bombs and magnesium incendiaries on 16 densely packed square miles, killing an estimated 84,000 people.⁵¹ Boot's act of remembering "one of the deadliest days of warfare ever" is not motivated by concern for the plight of civilians in Baghdad, but rather by the need to underscore the difference between "then" and "now", "Tokyo" and "Baghdad" in the history of the warfare of the United States. The "now" for Boot is not like the "then", the total warfare of the twentieth century, but instead harkens to a "before-then" mode of 18th and 19th century warfare. The limitations of precision technology during total warfare ("An average B-17 bomb ... missed its target by some 23, 000 feet") dictated that "if [the US] wanted a 90 percent probability of having hit a particular target, [it] had to drop some 9, 000 bombs."⁵² Boot does not dwell on what this might mean for those human beings on the receiving end of this necessity. Instead, he approvingly notes how this led the US generals to turn "necessity" into a "virtue" and engage in area bombing, which while "ostensibly intended to cripple enemy industry, really aimed at breaking enemy morale."⁵³

Not only does Boot make the incineration of 84,000 people (mostly civilians) a testament to American enterprise in the face of adversity, but he also observes how this total warfare of the twentieth century was a deviation from the chivalrous warfare practiced by the US in the 18th and 19th centuries when "columns of professional soldiers marched towards each other across open fields and civilians were hurt only by accident."⁵⁴ And it is this prior-then, this time and mode of chivalrous warfare that Boot finds similar to the present-Baghdad. Even more remarkably, Boot is concerned that the US is even more chivalrous towards its enemies in the now, trying to spare not only civilians but also enemy combatants.

Such chivalry is not a product of morality per se, but technology. The deployment of "[p]recision-guided weapons make it possible to obliterate a target with one carefully aimed bomb."⁵⁵ Now, Boot acknowledges that even "smart" bombs are sometimes likely to miss and costly mistakes are bound to be made. But given that "100 percent accuracy is assumed to be the norm," these misses that, according to Boot, occur around "7 percent to 10 percent" of the time tend to cause "a scandal."⁵⁶

In Boot's world, to be horrified at "collateral damage" that occurs only around 7 per cent to 10 percent of the time, would be either an act of scandal or of propaganda. Thus to be horrified at Abdulrahman's killing would be to make an undue scandal or to engage in an act of propaganda on behalf of America's enemies.

⁵¹ Max Boot, "Sparing Civilians, Buildings and Even the Enemy", in E. L. Gaston, ed., *The Laws of War and 21st Century Conflict*, (New York: International Debate Education Association, 2012), 104-106.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 105

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 105

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

Dogs on Two Legs

Brandon Bryant is in the brain of the drone, a windowless room somewhere in New Mexico. In the crosshairs, he can see “a flat-roofed house made of mud, with a shed used to hold goats.”⁵⁷ When the order to fire comes through, he pinpoints the roof with a laser allowing the pilot sitting next to him to launch a Hellfire missile from a drone circling somewhere in the sky above that house in Afghanistan. Three seconds before the missile is about to obliterate the house and shed, a child suddenly walks around the corner. Sick to his stomach, Bryant wonders "Did we just kill a kid?" "Yeah, I guess that was a kid," his co-pilot replies. "Was that a kid?" they write into a chat window on the monitor. An anonymous observer in an unknown military command center writes back, "No. That was a dog,"⁵⁸

III.

And so emerges the international. Not doing something about the “horror” of those coloured bodies over there is scandalous. To be horrified by coloured bodies over here is scandalous. This international is littered with victims, saviours, natives, terrorists, and bad fathers but no human beings.

Mahmood Mamdani observes that, “[w]hat horrifies the modern political sensibility is not violence *per se*, but violence that does not make sense.”⁵⁹ Mamdani’s work, of course, goes on to historicize, to show how what appears to be senseless to the modern political sensibility is and can be understood through recourse to politics and history.⁶⁰ While Mamdani’s strategy of producing better and more knowledge of what is distant to the modern political sensibility is worthwhile, in this essay, I wonder if the task of decolonial critique is not so much to historicize violence out there, but rather modern horror and its other side modern compassion. Doing so enables us to glimpse the racialization of affect and its operation in the epistemological distancing of the abstract from the concrete, the observer from the observed, the oppressor from the oppressed, and the national from the international.

⁵⁷ Abé, “Dreams in Infrared: The Woes of an American Drone Operator,”

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/pain-continues-after-war-for-american-drone-pilot-a-872726.html>

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

⁵⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, “Making Sense of Political Violence in Postcolonial Africa,” *Identity, Culture and Politics*, 3:2, 2002, 2.

⁶⁰ The latest one is *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2009).