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“What the World Looks Like”: On Banality and Spectacle

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

**“WHAT THE WORLD LOOKS LIKE”:
ON BANALITY AND SPECTACLE**

GRAHAM MACPHEE AND ANGELA NAIMOU

Nobody cares any longer what the world looks like.
—Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains”
(1964)

I

We live in what is widely described as an age of perpetual, global war: a condition of war whose spatial extension spans the surface of the planet, the height of its airspace, and the depth of its oceans, and whose time envisages no end.¹ Bodies and environments become incidental victims in the search for targets. War noise—barely heard at a distance by some, not heard at all by others, or perhaps made by the pounding of one’s own skull for those considered targets—becomes a chronic drone. As with earlier imperial and proxy wars, contemporary war lulls some into acting as though they do not live in wartime while compelling others to confront their everyday vulnerability every day. If contemporary war has an antonym, it is neither “peace” nor “norm.”

War has become such a pervasive discursive frame for organizing social, cultural, economic, and political life that it has come to operate almost as if it were a dead metaphor—like using the term “typing” in reference to a computer keyboard. War extends beyond literal war zones and seeps into the social and cultural imagination more broadly, where it merges with longer histories of racial violence that underpin ideas of peaceful order and security. In the United States, the routine traffic stop is a minor annoyance for some but a dreaded encounter for those for whom the threat of unprovoked assault and escalation feels routine, as if traffic stops become military checkpoints (Swaine, Lartey, and Laughland 2015). So, protesters against the routinization of police brutality face SWAT units armed with riot gear, tear gas, armored personnel carriers, and the rhetoric of war; unarmed people are declared justifiably killed for any expression of resistance to arrest, including staying still; kindergartners are arrested by police officers in schools for throwing tantrums and are funneled through the criminal justice system; and older schoolchildren are tasered, maced, shackled, body slammed, arrested, and even shot for failing to follow instructions, talking back to authorities, or getting into fistfights.²

Against this vision of the present, to suggest that war has been banalized may at first sound callous, as though to suggest that its pervasiveness has made war into something trite, trivial, or petty in the familiar ways that the term “banal” is used to devalue what is common. Such a conventional understanding of banality assumes an absolute disconnection between war and everyday life, forgetting their complex historical entwining and mutual constitution. The term “banal” itself originally referred to “compulsory feudal service,” locating its etymology in the encompassing economic, social, and political order of feudalism, where military obligations were woven into everyday life.³ War and the everyday have not suddenly come into conflict or complicity, but have historically required and structured each other. In feudal societies this interdependence was visible; but in modernity a different configuration of appearance obtains, within which the interdependence of violence and civility disappears.

As Howard Caygill observes, modern politics is premised on “the removal of violence from everyday life and its concentration in a centralized bureaucratic administration” (1994, 50), a reconceptualization of politics famously identified by Immanuel Kant as the trajectory towards “perpetual peace” (1991).⁴ But such a frame, Caygill argues, “is ill-suited for reflecting on the theme of violence” since “the very context of civility is established by the exclusion of violence.” From this perspective, “violence is in every respect the exception, whether as a sign of the breakdown

of civility, or else as the potential force which protects the borders of civility.” Conversely, such a “notion of civil freedom requires that violence be concentrated in the state, and preferably in the hands of professionals such as police and military.” This separation of violence and civility in modernity engenders a new structuring of appearance: “the overall effect,” Caygill writes, “is to remove responsibility for violence from civil society and to obscure its complicity with civil freedom” (1994, 23). The violence disposed to defend the space of politics at its borders is depoliticized, and so becomes a spectacle to be observed by a passive citizenry. At the same time, social relations are recast as pacific and noncoercive, so that the “violence of civility” is rendered invisible (24).

To speak of the banalization of war is not, then, to belittle or downplay the destructiveness of militarized violence. The task instead is to take seriously the *commonplaceness* of war, to examine how war structures the everyday and, conversely, to consider how the structuring of the everyday drives, organizes, and occludes the militarized violence upon which it depends. The focus on banality in this special issue is a way of making visible this configuration of appearance, in which violence either *appears* as spectacular or *disappears* as banal. In this economy of apperception, the highly publicized images of “shock and awe” bombings and the unpublicized drone strikes are deeply connected: one ratifies the other, one promises to terrorize its targets through their affective response while the other portends its potential to come before one knows it has struck. The lethal fireworks of “shock and awe” are the other side of the torture at Abu Ghraib, Bagram, and other, unidentified black sites. The horrors of dictatorial regimes that target and torture their own citizens are the complement of the long-term economic aid and political support those same dictators receive. The graphic images of violence captured on video are the obverse of the chronic slow death of peoples under occupation or tyranny. Banality and spectacle are each other’s corollary: this is what the world looks like.

War both establishes and destabilizes the fundamental distinctions between civilian and combatant, citizen and alien, and the lawful and the illegitimate. New modes of military violence in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 present have exposed the fragility of another set of distinctions, namely that between emergency and routine, crisis and continuity, the spectacular and the prosaic, the extraordinary and the banal. Military violence, traditionally justified as the temporary and necessary suspension of the norms of civility in a state of exception, gives way to routinized forms of militarized violence in everyday life—from state surveillance of the everyday and the suppression of political dissent in the name of security

to the deployment of military technologies and combat weapons in police actions, border patrols, and the development of consumer goods. In the countless acts of militarized violence that may fall under the aggregate category of the global War on Terror, state and transnational actors have used imperial and insurgent modes of war that structure and suffuse the fabric of social, economic, and political life in innumerable ways.

In *This Muslim American Life*, Moustafa Bayoumi suggests that “we do not yet understand or appreciate the profound ways that the War on Terror has created a political ecology of its own, one that relies on excessive secrecy, differential rights, innovative forms of racism, expanded executive power, and permanent war, while also threatening to undermine our bedrock principles of equality and privacy” (2015, 19).⁵ If we take the banalization of war as a core feature of the War on Terror, one way to examine this emergent “political ecology” is to identify its complex interrelationships, to trace the links between militarized violence or militant-like fetishizations of violence within the United States (mass shootings, unjustified police killings, the mass incarceration of aliens and citizens, the War on Drugs) and the violence of the global War on Terror overseas (military and counterinsurgency battles, drone attacks, airstrikes, kidnappings, torture, and indefinite detention). Because war is much more than military violence, involving institutions of knowledge production, economies, and cultural historical practices, these interrelationships also cross over into mundane practices and non-violent cultural habits—as in the case of the development of the Internet or the origin of Daylight Saving Time (Dudziak 2013, 11–32). Sometimes the links between war and the everyday are traceable; sometimes, the full commonplaceness of war—in its anticipations and aftereffects—makes them too diffuse to track.

As Patrick Deer observes in his essay in this issue, the rhetoric of war has become a way to structure our understanding of nearly any struggle where winning is said to assure safety and well-being: the battle against cancer, the culture wars, the sex wars, and so on. The War on Drugs is now widely accepted as having been “lost”—but, as Chenjerai Kuminyaka suggests in his contribution to the Critical Forum section below, the real failure may be located in the declaration of the war metaphor itself, in the launching of a response to drug addiction *as war*. The power of the war metaphor is that it can simultaneously justify and mask literal warfare: as both a “war” on drugs and yet not *really* a war, not a real war as such. The banality of war metaphors occludes the violence of literal warfare by drawing attention to it; making a spectacle of the banal, it banalizes spectacle.

II

Violence and civility, war and the quotidian, structure each other in the formation of the banalities of private life, in our most humdrum and intimate moments. Bayoumi notes the psychological effects of surveillance on what may be the most banal feature of humanity: idle thoughts, an inner life. He writes, “having something to hide—or having the right to hold an inner life and to be free to determine how much of yourself you show to others—is not only a guarantee of our democracy but also a necessary part of being human.” The “dark innovation of the Patriot Act” is not merely the invocation of wartime security to justify the overreach of state power into the everyday life of citizens: it is the transformation of our political imagination of civility, an injury to the relation between citizen and state (2015, 18). As Elaine Scarry writes,

The Patriot Act inverts the constitutional requirement that people’s lives be private and the work of government officials be public; it instead crafts a set of conditions in which our inner lives become transparent and the workings of the government become opaque. Either one of these outcomes would imperil democracy; together they not only injure the country but also cut off the avenues of repair. (Scarry 2013; quoted in Bayoumi 2015, 18)

What Scarry describes is nothing less than the reformulation of the political condition of appearance in modern, formally democratic societies. Or what Hannah Arendt would describe as the disintegration of care for “what the world looks like” (2013, 34). This bridge to Arendt’s terminology is worth dwelling on because our special issue consciously invokes and seeks to rethink for our contemporary moment Arendt’s striking but difficult formulation—the banality of evil.

Arendt’s invention of a new political category for modernity in her report on the Eichmann trial was and has remained contentious and disputed. In large part, this has to do with the deliberately rebarbative style of thinking and writing she adopted in the face of the political and moral collapse revealed by National Socialism (see Knott 2014, 15–29). But it also has to do with the economical and elusive manner of its introduction when her report was first published in 1963 as a book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where it was provocatively deployed as the work’s subtitle. Initially the phrase was taken by some to imply a sneering disregard for the victims of the Final Solution and a perverse dismissal of the enormity of the acts committed by its perpetrators. However, while these initial reactions no longer dominate discussion (Berkowitz 2013), the formulation remains potentially problematic within contemporary academic frameworks in at least two different ways. Most directly, this difficulty resides in her

elliptical elaboration of the phrase in terms of “sheer thoughtlessness,” her claim that Eichmann “lacked imagination,” and that “*he merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing*” (1965, 287: emphasis in original). When taken in isolation such statements appear to offer a reductively subjective approach which functions, in turn, through a reduced notion of Eichmann’s own motivation and subjective commitment to the political project of National Socialism. By accepting the lie of Eichmann’s smallness—his lack of motivation or commitment, his status merely as a conscientious bureaucrat—so it is said, Arendt dangerously underestimates the destructive potential of totalitarian ideology and the movements it would sustain.⁶

More diffusely, we might also see a different kind of difficulty for the value and usefulness of Arendt’s formulation in a theoretical environment that has become especially sensitive to the radical potential of the everyday, whether in terms of micronarratives, minor literatures, micropolitics, performativity, the rhizomatic, the lateral, the contingent, or the material. From this perspective, in associating “evil” with “banality” understood as the commonplace or prosaic, Arendt appears to disregard the critical potential of everyday discourses and practices for unmasking and subverting the violent strategies and will to domination of transcendent ontologies of essence and presence: of grand narratives of progress and universality and of all-consuming structures of power and governmentality. In the first case, “banal” is taken as a subjective judgment that arrogantly dismisses the complex motivations exhibited by those drawn to totalitarian ideologies. In the second, it is seen as failing to appreciate the political resources available in the interactions of everyday life, which are devalued as “banal” against more philosophically august paradigms. In both cases, this stance appears to involve a withdrawal from social life—exhibiting either an exorbitantly subjective self-regard or a blindness to the granular texture of prosaic, material existence. Given the resonance of Arendt’s association with the formulation “banality,” any project that operates in its shadow or under its sign would need to address such claims. And without seeking to enlist all the contributions to this special issue as necessarily “Arendtian” or impute to them a shared commitment to her work, it is fair to say that this project was conceived in the belief that both of these interpretations profoundly misunderstand and massively underestimate the unsettling force of Arendt’s conception of “banality.”

One way to assay Arendt’s complex thinking of this term is provided by her discussion of thinking and thoughtlessness in an interview with Joachim Fest broadcast on German television in 1964. “Thoughtlessness,” she had observed in the Eichmann book, is “something [that is] by no

means identical with stupidity” (1965, 287–88). In the interview with Fest, she elaborates on her pairing of “thinking” and “thoughtlessness” in terms of spatio-temporal experience, of the *Mitsein* of *Dasein*:⁷

There’s an English idiom, “Stop and Think.” Nobody can think unless they stop. If you force someone into remorseless activity, or they allow themselves to be forced into it, it’ll always be the same story, right? You’ll always find an awareness of responsibility can’t develop. It can only develop in the moment when a person reflects—not on himself, but on what he’s doing. (Arendt 2013, 60)

The key to understanding Arendt’s remark is in the final qualification, that “thinking” in her sense involves reflection not on oneself but on what one is *doing*. For Arendt “doing,” or what she more typically calls “action” and “acting together,” is never wholly subjective or self-involved but is always intersubjective and so “worldly.” Indeed, as she writes in *The Human Condition*, action “constitutes” the “public part of the world common to us all”; “it is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (Arendt 1958, 198).⁸ “Thinking” for Arendt is not self-contemplation but reflection on action understood as the constitution of the “world,” “as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives” (2013, 34). And “the reality of the world,” she observes, “is guaranteed by the presence of others” (1958, 199). As such, “thinking” must necessarily address, be informed by, and be open to human plurality, since “plurality . . . is the *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm.” Indeed, “the calamities of action” arise “from the attempt to do away with this plurality,” which “is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself” (220).

Arendt’s conception of thinking and action is neither solipsistic nor insensitive to the everyday interactions of social life; rather it is intensely *worldly*. This is made clear most famously in chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” where Arendt discusses the modern national state’s propensity to violence as it is revealed by the predicament of the stateless. As she writes, “the first loss that the rightless suffered was . . . the loss of the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world” (1973, 293). She continues,

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental

than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice. . . . This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of the people deprived of human rights. (Arendt 1973, 296)

What the “Rights of Man” fail to understand is their prior embodiment in “social texture,” the myriad and overlapping networks of affiliation and recognition whose operation, at the barest minimum, would include custom, belief, language, idiom, intonation, tempos of speech, protocols of behavior and nonverbal interaction, phenotypical characteristics, and modes of dress, gait, and styling, as well as routine patterns of social interaction, transaction, and interchange. “The calamity of the rightless,” Arendt insists, “is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems within given communities—but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever” (295). “No law exists for them” because they are no longer drawn into and acknowledged within the linkages and connections of social texture; they become “superfluous” because “nobody [could] be found to ‘claim’ them.” “The Nazis started their extermination of the Jews,” she notes, not just by revoking their legal status but also by “cutting them off from the world of the living” (296). The Nazi genocides depended on the exclusion of populations from “a place in the world,” a worldlessness that was ruthlessly and determinedly enforced and relentlessly pursued towards its conclusion.

It is less often mentioned, however, that Arendt saw another kind of “worldlessness” among the populations who produced the perpetrators. Indeed, this is the central concern of what is perhaps her most philosophically audacious and innovative work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951. In an interview with Günther Gaus, she also identifies this worldlessness in terms of the disintegration of social texture, but now not purposefully enforced but arising unconsciously from the rhythms of capital, the cycles “of laboring and consuming” (2013, 34). This “peculiar loneliness . . . consists in being thrown back upon oneself; a state of affairs in which, so to speak, consumption takes the place of all the truly relating activities” (34–35). And in this loneliness “nobody cares any longer what the world looks like” (34). That is, nobody tends or cares for “the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word,” the space “guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all,” the space of “plurality” which is “the public realm itself” (1958, 198, 199, 220).

Taken together, this double diagnosis of the disintegration of social texture and the predicament of worldlessness helps to understand Arendt's invention of a new political category, the "banality of evil." "The trouble with Eichmann," she writes in the epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, "was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were not perverted or sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (1965, 276). This is not a claim about Eichmann's lack of personal attributes; it is not that he was an automaton or bureaucratic robot bereft of the individual motivations, personal convictions, or emotional conflicts of a "normal" person. Indeed, it is the "normality" of Eichmann's sense of his own personal conviction wherein the challenge to traditional modes of legal jurisprudence arises. Traditional legal paradigms would judge criminal responsibility in terms of the intentions of the individual and their transgression of socially sanctioned legal norms. Arendt's point is that the Nazi genocides exceed the terms of such an individualized conception of criminal responsibility:

From the standpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied . . . that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani* [an enemy of mankind], commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong. (Arendt 1965, 276)

Eichmann points to a larger problem, in Arendt's view, not because he was without the individual resources or strength of character needed to avoid committing criminal acts, the individual resources to enable "him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong." It is rather that his criminality was enabled, intensified, and made all the more sustainable and brutally effective precisely because he was in full possession of them. Arendt's grim humor is directed at the ample evidence that Eichmann extravagantly reflected on himself, but not on what he was *doing*.

Arendt's turn to "banality" is, then, a way of relocating the happening of the Nazi genocides within the disintegration of social texture and the predicament of worldlessness. The crucial step for Arendt is to expand the purview of criminal responsibility beyond the individual but *without abnegating the force of individual guilt* (1965, 278). Or in the terms we have identified above, it was to place Eichmann's actions within the condition where "nobody cares any longer what the world looks like" (2013, 34), to locate it within the "*circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong*" (276; emphasis added). But as Arendt explains to Fest, in so doing she needs to "qualify" or elucidate

her earlier pronouncement that Eichmann “doesn’t actually have any criminal motives”; what she meant, she now indicates, was that he didn’t have “what is usually understood by ‘criminal motives.’” She offers instead the formulation that “he wanted to say ‘we,’ and going-along-with-the-rest and wanting-to-say-we like this were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible” (2013, 43).

Arendt’s deployment of “banality” is not, then, the arrogant dismissal of individual lived experience, of the emotional conflicts and personal commitments of perpetrators. But equally, her conception of “social texture” and of a “place in the world” is not a straightforward, non-normative, or uncritical valorization of the prosaic, the commonplace, and the everyday—as the locus or principle of capillarity, materiality, or contingency that would undo ontologies of essence, presence, and mastery, for example. Instead, her conception of the “world” as “the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives” (2013, 34)—whose “reality . . . is guaranteed by the presence of others” (1958, 199)—provides a propaedeutic for making critical distinctions about our necessary location in immanence, our thrownness as *Dasein*. In her interview with Fest, Arendt elaborates on this critical procedure by developing the abstract account of “acting together” that she had given in *The Human Condition*. Now she folds it back into the atomization and frightening sense of powerlessness which is such a pervasive concern in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (see for example 1973, 139–57, 230–31). “So long as you’re alone,” she observes, “you’re always powerless, however strong you may be.” In which case, “going along with the rest—the kind of going along that involves lots of people acting together—produces power” (2013, 43). Taken abstractly, this sense of connectivity, affiliation, of everyday coincidence and affirmation in acting together is as yet undifferentiated:

This feeling of power that arises from acting together is absolutely not wrong in itself, it’s a general human feeling. But it’s not good, either. It’s simply neutral. It’s something that’s simply a phenomenon, a general human phenomenon that needs to be described as such. In acting in this way, there’s always an extreme feeling of pleasure. (Arendt 2013, 43–44)

But if acting together, as in *The Human Condition*, might “constitut[e]” the “public part of the world common to us all” and manifest the “plurality which is the *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm” (1958, 220), Arendt now acknowledges (post the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem) that it might also operate quite differently. Where “acting together” is “guaranteed by the presence of others” (1958, 199)—by plurality—it involves “discussing things together, reaching

certain decisions, accepting responsibility, thinking about what we are doing.” But as Eichmann has demonstrated, there is another, “perverse form of acting”—which Arendt now designates as “functioning.” “In this functioning,” she notes, “the feeling of pleasure is always there”; but what is “eliminated in functioning” is “all”: all of the “discussing things together, reaching certain decisions, accepting responsibility, thinking about what we are doing” (2013, 44). Where “thinking” requires care for “what the world looks like” (2013, 34)—for “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (1958, 198)—“what you have there,” in Eichmann’s testimony, “is mere freewheeling.” “And the pleasure in this mere functioning,” she writes, “this pleasure was quite evident in Eichmann” (2013, 44).

However we are to think the banalization of war, if we bear in mind Arendt’s concern for “what the world looks like” (2013, 34) then we cannot simply construe “banality” as a subjective judgment of disapproval or an uncritical valorization of what escapes the proper, the official, or the normative. The legacy of Arendt’s conception of the “banality of evil” remains contentious, but in developing that legacy by addressing the banalization of war we should recall what is at stake: “the reality of the world” as it is “guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all” (1958, 199).

III

Care for what the world looks like in Arendt’s sense is a core task of Dunya Mikhail’s poetry. An Iraqi poet who fled to the United States after being threatened by Saddam Hussein’s government for her publications, she was part of what Iraqi poetry critics had called the “war generation.” The war that periodized literary history here was the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988): the end of that war led literary critics to anticipate a “postwar generation” of poets even as that war prepared the way for the next, the invasion of Kuwait by a cash-strapped Iraqi government and the US response—that spectacular display of aerial high tech warfare of the Gulf War, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The succession of wars prompted Mikhail to publish an article in the *Baghdad Observer* reminding those would-be postwar critics “that there might be no postwar generation, as the war seem[ed] to be contiguous. It was an ironic article, in which I objected to the whole situation” (2013b). Mikhail puts this continuity differently elsewhere, in what may be called a response to the trauma of war but is instead, we suggest, a response to war rendered relentlessly banal: “My eyes were opened to war, and now, when I close my eyes, I still see war”

(2010). War appears even more clearly when one has been put to sleep by its banality. In her poetry, spectacles of war are shot through with the everyday and the ordinary, and ordinary stories are rife with the effects of war, pointing to the impact of militarized violence on how we imagine the relationship between politics, society, and art.

Mikhail's poem "The Old Olive Tree" considers violence in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The sudden eruption of spectacular violence is not contrasted to the slow, grinding pace of everyday occupation—rather, violent spectacle and banality work in cooperation with one other. They are inverse sides of the same territory. "The Old Olive Tree" explores this enmeshment of violence within civility by invoking the fatal power of details and the fatal effects of organizing war into a coherent narrative:

—And between the beginning
and the end
are all those details
that are killing you
and killing me.
(Mikhail 2013, 52)

A coherent story of any particular war—its causes, its course, and its consequences "between the beginning / and the end"—is blasted to rubble, fragmented into "all those details / that are killing you / and killing me." Read one way, the small and the ordinary—"all those details"—appear as trivial matters of difference between the warring factions, detracting from their shared humanity. But the poem does not dismiss these details as trivial: "all those details" are powerful precisely because they interfere with the form of a coherent "plot."

In Mikhail's poem, such details are both dangerously excessive and underestimated: they enact a double violence against "you" and "me," characters that cannot exist outside of the "plot" that is simultaneously overwhelmed and driven by those details that "are killing." "You" and "me" only come together in the pronoun "us" when the two enemies are named by the third. Initially killed by the details that are clung to for survival, they become shadowy "nightmares" to be killed off a second time by readers whose response to details that exceed their understanding is boredom:

—And because the plot was hard to follow,
it bored the readers:
they fell asleep and saw us as nightmares,
and that was the end of it.
(Mikhail 2013a, 52)

Details kill; but they also keep observers from caring about the dead. Boredom here is not mere disaffection by the usual stuff but the precondition for transforming warring factions into phantasmatic threats to be eliminated. The end result imagined by the speaker of the poem is the recognition that war narrative has failed its conventionally assumed purpose of convincing observers or eliciting sympathy to any one side, or by imaginatively bridging the distance between sides, in the best effort of humanistic understanding.

Details become deadly because banal—because they bore. But in boring they are transformed, and the particulars of human life are rendered into images of spectacular horror, nightmares to be killed. It is to the sea that the speaker looks to drown the war stories—to “cast [them] into the sea / and move on.” But where and how to “move on” remains a problem the poem cannot resolve. As it plays on a cliché about overcoming grievance or injury, it cannot help but evoke the image of the stateless, the fugitive, the refugee—on the move, pushed into the sea, expelled or fleeing if not physically prevented from moving at all.

IV

This special issue of *College Literature* aims to be an initial staging post or marker for thinking the “banalization of war” as we are coming to understand it in the United States and in Western countries allied to that project after fifteen years of the “War on Terror.” This geopolitical demarcation is not meant to be exclusive or to discount other experiences of banal wartime; indeed, quite the reverse. The claims that are made here are urgent and we hope insightful: but they are made in the recognition of their limitations and spatio-temporal locality. This special issue is offered as a propaedeutic, not an encyclopedia.

Wartime has conventionally been located in modern Western discourses of civility as exceptional. And this pairing of normality and exception may seem to corroborate contemporary theory’s imaginary of order and resistance, rationality and its deconstruction, grand narrative and temporal dispersal. In his essay “Banal Time: War after Grand Narrative,” Graham MacPhee locates a discomfiting echo of the opposition of grand narrative and temporal dispersal in the banal time exhibited both by the affective disposition signaled by the POW/MIA flag and by the conditions of apperception of the political and military decision makers who orchestrated the US war in Southeast Asia. To explore this banal time, the essay turns to Christopher Nolan’s neo-noir *Memento* (2000), whose protagonist is shown to embody the “functioning” that

Arendt discussed in her interview with Joachim Fest. In demonstrating that the banal temporality of functioning in *Memento* exceeds the abstract opposition of narrative and dispersal, the essay argues that contemporary theory remains disastrously ill-equipped to address the modes of agency and affective drive that are harnessed in the project of endless war.

Patrick Deer's essay provides both a valuable overview of contemporary American war culture and an incisive argument about the cultural and political effects of what appears to be a paradoxical double movement: the distancing of the vast majority of the domestic population from the violent effects of war and the increasing prevalence of violence at the level of representation. The penetration of war culture into every aspect of everyday life, Deer suggests, gives rise to a more fragmented, decentered, and diffuse cultural authority than manifested in earlier moments of imperial military domination; but the banality of this cultural authority does not make its ability to normalize and silence the violence of war any the less powerful or politically significant. However, Deer sees important resources for challenging such a banalization of war in the HBO series *The Wire* and in a variety of contemporary writing about recent wars, exemplified in Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012). For Deer, the pervasiveness of war culture is met with a profusion of counter representations, and the role of cultural analysis is to map this conflictual landscape in order to further "the struggle to demilitarize our culture" (83).

In "Robert Lowell, Perpetual War, and the Legacy of Civil War Elegy," Michael LeMahieu places contemporary instances of the violence of civility—the killings of Jordan Russell Davis, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, and so many others—within the context of a much longer history of suppression, elision, and forgetting effected through the memorialization of violence in the United States. At its heart lies a subtle reading of Lowell's "For the Union Dead" that finds in the poem a diagnosis of a complacency about civil rights and civil freedom that anticipates contemporary critiques of mainstream indifference to the value of black lives in contemporary America. LeMahieu thereby allows Lowell's poem to be seen as a moment that has been poetically expanded and imaginatively written over by poets such as Kevin Young, Natasha Trethewey, and Claudia Rankine, each of whom in different ways places the memorialization of the American Civil War within the context of the embattled legacy of the Civil Rights struggle.⁹

Patricia Stuelke sees in contemporary US war culture an opportunity to reflect on postfeminist theorizations of desire. In "Loving in the Iraq War Years," which focuses on Alicia Erian's fiction, and especially her

novel *Towelhead* (2005), Stuelke tracks how the War on Terror discourse of multiculturalism has enlisted the neoliberal logic of postfeminist desire that emerged from sex-positive feminism. Delinked from historical and political context, Stuelke shows how easily an abstract concept of “desire” can be aligned with the neoliberal imperative to perform sexual agency as a mark of autonomy and as a route to establishing national citizenship. In Stuelke’s reading, Erian’s novel provides an unsettling vision of the homeland where the social and political structuring of female sexual desire enacts a violence that is not occluded or ignored but is rather to be identified with and taken for freedom.

For James Smith, the recent iteration of the Bond franchise—*Skyfall* (2012)—provides a valuable weather vane for assessing the encroachment of the surveillance culture associated with the NSA and its willing subordinate in the United Kingdom, GCHQ. If bureaucracy is, as Hannah Arendt put it, “rule by nobody” (1958, 40), then the Five Eyes supranational intelligence program is in this sense *surveillance by nobody*. Smith’s reading in “How Safe Do You Feel?: James Bond, *Skyfall*, and the Politics of the Secret Agent in an Age of Ubiquitous Threat” charts the lengths to which the film goes in order to sustain the figure of the dashing spy-hero in an age dominated by digitized surveillance at source, the world of surveillance by nobody. But what Smith’s reading also shows is the powerful drive in contemporary British culture to rewrite and rearrange its own imperial history to accommodate the demands of US global hegemony and of the globalized neoliberal project.

Nadine Knight and Jane Hanley both engage with the tourist gaze as an optic for surveying a longer history of the banalization of war, although each explores a quite different context and finds very different insights there. In “A Vast Holiday Frolic?: The Touristic Potential of Sherman’s March to the Sea,” Knight looks at the diaries, letters, and memoirs of soldiers of all ranks who served in the Savannah Campaign and in South Carolina during the American Civil War, a campaign that anticipated the total war of the twentieth century in targeting civilian infrastructure. Knight traces the ways that soldiers drew on the tropes of touristic writing and travel guides to distance themselves from the destruction they were inflicting. But in so doing, they were remapping the South as a locus of tradition, Romantic ruin, and picturesque beauty that occluded the violence of slavery, so preparing the way for the wholesale reinvention of the South and the history of slavery under Jim Crow. In contrast, Hanley looks at the diary of a single Australian nurse, Agnes Hodgson, during the period of her voluntary service on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War in “The Tourist Gaze in the Spanish

Civil War: Agnes Hodgson *Between Surgery and Spectacle*.” Hanley argues that as a woman, Hodgson had a different and less heroic style than the travel writing of male Australian writers in World War I, and her less ideologically driven motives for serving in Spain gives the everydayness of her writing a particular insightfulness. In contrast to fascist propaganda about the antireligious fervor of the Republican forces, for example, Hodgson describes the burning of a church as “an act of faith” of which “Christ might approve” (212). As Hanley notes, Hodgson often saw Spain through touristic stereotypes, and yet in lacking the more ideological framing of writers like Orwell, Hodgson’s more prosaic perspective nonetheless provides a valuable mode of witnessing war.

The second section of this special issue is given over to a Critical Forum that reflects on our title, “The Banalization of War.” The aim of this Critical Forum is to bring together a provocative range of intellectual perspectives on the intersections of banality and war, with both terms broadly conceived and explored in different historical and disciplinary contexts. Rather than establish a single framework, core issue, or consensus on the banalization of war, we invited contributors to participate in the forum in whatever way they thought especially relevant to the theme of this special issue. The wide range of approaches in each short think piece highlights the interplay and divergence between them, as contributors offer their responses to the banalization of war as condition, practice, object of analysis, or mode of critique. But a crucial idea emerges from Ania Loomba’s “The Everyday Violence of Caste” that is surely applicable to all the contributions in this special issue. That is Loomba’s argument that while a critique of the banalization of war in Western societies may be necessary, we should not construct the West as the exclusive site of a new predicament or as the privileged locus of historical experience, but should look to understand social developments across and beyond such boundaries.

NOTES

¹ On the reimagining of twentieth and twenty-first century war and its relationship to temporality, see Mary Dudziak’s *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (2013), and Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (2006). On the militarization of ocean space and its relationship to migration, see Elizabeth Deloughrey’s “Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity” (2010).

² For an overview of this tendency see the ACLU’s report *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing* (2014) and Kraska (2007). An updated record of police killings in the United States through 2015 is available

- at *The Counted* website: www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database.
- ³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “banal.”
 - ⁴ As Caygill notes, this separation and opposition of violence and civility was challenged from within the post-Enlightenment philosophical tradition by G. W. F. Hegel (1994, 22–28). Notably, in “The German Constitution,” Hegel warned that “the change from the [feudal] right of private warfare [*Faustrecht*; literally ‘fist right’] to politics should not be regarded as a transition from anarchy to constitutionalism,” or from violence to civility. Instead, “the true principle remains the same, and the change is purely superficial” (1999, 48–49). Hegel pursues the implication of violence and civility obscured in modernity in the section on “Absolute Freedom and Terror” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: see Hegel 1977, 355–363. As Caygill notes (1997), Hannah Arendt rewrites Kant’s trajectory towards perpetual peace by reinserting the violence of civility in “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World”: “the abolition of war . . . would harbor its own peculiar dangers; the various armies . . . would be replaced by federated police forces, and our experiences with modern police-states and totalitarian governments . . . are not apt to make us overoptimistic about this prospect” (1968, 93–94).
 - ⁵ For an insight into the role of entrapment and the use of informers in this new political ecology, see the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice report *Targeted and Entrapped: Manufacturing the “Homegrown Threat” in the United States* (CHRGJ 2011).
 - ⁶ This claim is made at some length in Bettina Stangneth’s recent study, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* (2014). Graham MacPhee provides a detailed rebuttal in “Arendt After Jerusalem” (2015).
 - ⁷ This understanding of Arendt’s project as the rethinking of the *Mitsein* of *Dasein* is proposed by Howard Caygill (1997).
 - ⁸ In effect, Arendt is redeploying Hegel’s concept of recognition within a context orientated towards plurality. For perceptive analyses of the unacknowledged echoes of Hegel in Arendt, see Tsao (2004) and Buchwalter (2013).
 - ⁹ LeMahieu’s invocation of the Little Rock Nine in the essay is also an important opportunity to remember Hannah Arendt’s own extraordinary blindness to the historical reality of the United States, as revealed perhaps most glaringly in her “Reflections on Little Rock” (2003), first published in 1959.

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