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Chapter 20 was previously published as Feldman, Keith, "Empire's Verticality: The Al/Pak Frontier, Virtual Culture, and Racialization from Above," Comparative American Studies, Vol. 9 no. 4, online available at: http://www.maneyonline.com/loi/cas, re-published with permission of Maney Publishing.

Chapter 23 was previously published as Maldonado-Torres, Nelson, "Cézanne's Gift and the Decolonial Turn," Radical Philosophy Review Vol. 9, no. 1, 2006, re-published with permission of Philosophy Documentation Center.
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The canvas is dripping with blood. The abstraction suggests a decolonization without guarantees, meaning its goals, strategies, and imaginings of alternative futurities in multiple sites and scales are unpredictable, contingent, and stubbornly difficult. The corporeality of blood, on the other hand, makes concrete decolonization a project that is urgent, agonistic, and structured by violence. This dialectic of decolonization is also evoked by what is rendered in black—billowing featheriness versus piercing bolts of lightning.

Critical ethnic studies is a project saturated with the pasts of our making and the expectations for our futures yet to come. Our efforts to render that project here is, like the painting Decolonized by the Puerto Rican–born artist Sophia Maldonado, a narrative that is not singular but part of a larger oeuvre of thought that is instructive but not exhaustive. This anthology might be read as emblematic of a time, a place, and a group, but we encourage readers to consider it a meditation rather than a symbol. As such we begin with our meditations on this collection—filtered through Maldonado’s art—which urges us not merely to write and think about but also to see, smell, and feel
This essay examines the critical and social potential of the contemporary aesthetic works of Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi artist based in New York City. I argue that close attention to the nonvisual sensory elements of his performance projects offers a way to glean evidence of the histories, geographies, and sentiments of those disappeared by U.S. military operations in the Middle East and South Asia. I propose the concept of a "queer calculus" as an alternative mode of understanding the proliferation of drone warfare and the dominant militarized vision of U.S. imperialism that lies at its core. Queer calculus is a theoretical strategy that generates an account of both persistent systems and structures undergirding U.S. global counterinsurgency warfare and alternative logics, affects, and affiliations produced by racialized subjects in response. Through close readings of Bilal's visual and performance works the essay identifies ethical practices and perceptual regimes that access the untold histories absented by the abstractions of the long war. This work contributes to the intellectual and political project of critical ethnic studies by questioning the abstractions and rationalities of U.S. imperial discourse and the statistical modes through which the collateral damage of counterinsurgency warfare is calculated. In the process my reading exposes another calculus, a queer calculus of bodies in pain and of bodies that imagine alternatives to that pain. By employing the critical tools of ethnic studies, queer studies, and visual studies, this chapter gestures at alternative ways of understanding drone weaponry and the effects of this violent practice on the gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies that are its targets. An account of Bilal's queer calculus of pain thus responds to the call by critical ethnic studies scholars to identify new epistemological frameworks and vocabularies from which to understand these enduring forms of gendered racial violence and also signals an entirely different mode of inhabiting the world collectively and in relation to others in times of war.

Body Counts and the Price of Life and Death

When, in August 1990, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait just two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Wafaa Bilal was forced to flee. The Iraqi-born painter and visual artist was part of the secular student movement that refused to enlist in Saddam's army, which was newly tasked with suppressing the Shia-led popular uprisings that raged against his iron rule. Bilal fled to Kuwait before escaping to an American-sponsored refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, where he lived for nearly two years. He was eventually granted political asylum in the United States around September 11, 1992. In the context of contemporary U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and beyond, Bilal's story of exile and displacement serves as a potent reminder that the U.S. military presence in Iraq long predates our more recent preoccupations with the post-9/11 period. If we include the U.S. involvement in the Iran-Iraq War and the thirteen years of near-total economic sanctions that starved millions of Iraqis between the two ground occupations, the United States has had a fatal hand in the country for at least three decades. When asked in a May 1996 interview if the deaths of nearly half a million Iraqi children caused by economic sanctions and United Nations-mandated trade embargoes had been justified, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously replied, "We think the price is worth it."

The present-tense violence of U.S. militarism and aerial bombardment in Iraq can help explain Albright's calculus of what counts as a "livable and grievable life." In the performance works of Bilal sensory knowledge of the discourses of the U.S. racial security state and the Arab diasporic experimental art practices responds to the violent effects of the long war. The crucial force of Bilal's artwork hinges primarily on the pain he inflicts on his own body—especially his skin, that organ of touch and feeling that connects the body to the social world and provides a key platform for his artistic interventions. In
these aesthetic works embody the attempt to account for the subjective experiences and lived vulnerabilities of populations that are both produced and obscured by U.S. racial regimes of security.

If we want to understand modern security politics and practices, particularly the modes of intelligence gathering and killing technologies perfected in the domestic and international contexts of the long war, we need an alternate approach to the maps of strategic thinkers and security analysts. When read alongside the escalating use of drone technologies in U.S. military operations, Bilal's performance projects allow for a more complicated understanding of the ethical and affective relations that can emerge between Americans and Iraqis under the conditions of U.S. security and warfare. This understanding is framed by the interplay between what's "up in the air"—namely the discourses shaping the use of aerial surveillance and twenty-first-century military technologies—and what's "on the skin" as a way of capturing the painful intimacies of seemingly discrete peoples, histories, and geographies. These modes reveal two distinct but intersecting cartographic representations of landscape and the human terrain, with very different implications and blueprints for the future. Bilal is one artist who uses his own body to map the uneven contours of human vulnerability in times of war, uncovering the intimate and affective politics of U.S. imperial violence, those animated traces and "disqualified secrets" discarded by official accounts of the war, as well as the alternative models of affiliation these politics engender.

A recent performance by Bilal entitled ... and Counting highlights this approach by examining the ongoing U.S.-led massacre of Iraqi civilians, including the artist's own brother, who was killed by a drone missile strike in the family's hometown of Kufa, Iraq, in 2004. In this March 2010 piece staged in New York City, the artist transforms his body into a canvas by tattooing the names of Iraqi cities on his back and then, during a twenty-four-hour live performance, tattooing 105,000 dots onto this borderless map as audience members stand as witnesses while a select few solemnly recite the names of Iraqis and Americans killed in the U.S. occupation since 2003. Five thousand dots are marked first in red ink to represent dead American soldiers. The remaining 100,000 dots, meant to memorialize the "official" Iraqi death toll from the war, are in ultraviolet ink, invisible unless viewed under a black light. As this cursory description suggests, Bilal's piece asks its audience whose death "counts" in times of war, erecting what Neferti Tadii calls "living memories, living histories, as openings into other futures." But the piece also elicits timely questions about the Central Intelligence Agency's proliferating use of missile-armed unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, in targeted assassinations across Iraq and the Af-Pak borderlands.

How to Shoot an Iraqi and Collateral Damages
Bilal first gained international recognition for his 2007 performance Domestic Tension, in which he confined himself to a gallery space in Chicago for a month, inviting the public to visit a website where they could "shoot" him by remotely firing a paintball gun at his body. Originally known by the more straightforward, if provocative, title Shoot an Iraqi, this interactive performance piece had more than sixty-five thousand online users fire at the artist by month's end, transforming this virtual experience about collective unfeeling toward militarized warfare into a very tactile experience, most of all for its subject. Bilal's self-imposed spatial confinement enforces the dilemma that contemporary Iraqis face every day, living in domestic confinement due to the miseries of foreign occupation and sectarian conflict.

Recognized for his controversial video installations, Bilal made national headlines again in November 2010 by announcing that he would have a tiny
fist-size camera surgically installed into the back of his head for a year. The embedded camera captured a photograph every minute of the artist’s daily life and then transmitted that visual record to a website; the inaugural images are displayed at the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, as part of its new permanent collection. 3rdi sutures the technological apparatus of photography onto the artist’s own body; the arbitrary images captured by Bilal’s cyborg creation, with more than 500,000 pictures taken by the end of 2011, compose a visual record that waits interpretation and reception. With its backward glance, the piece asks us to confront the tyranny of the visual register and its renewed salience in the context of elevated surveillance and security panics in the contemporary period, as well as the critical histories of pain, humiliation, and subordination in performance art.

Bilal’s larger ensemble of work exemplifies the complex ways in which diasporic expressive culture can provide diagnoses of and alternatives to the geopolitical and epistemological maps produced by the U.S. global security state. In particular his works ask us to consider how the visual field is constitutive of both the logic and the materiality of war. This is true not only in the case of pilotless drones over the conflict zones of Iraq and Af-Pak, where cameras are quite literally appended onto missiles and bombs, but also in what he names “the comfort zone,” those more mundane settings far from killing fields in which war enlists and acts upon our senses. Thus an encounter with Bilal’s artwork elicits a transformation in our affective relationship to dominant visual and discursive frames of war.

My focus on the aerial perspective as central to U.S. global security regimes joins a range of critical ethnic and postcolonial feminist scholars in a collective effort to challenge the systematic embrace of the visual in cultural and intellectual responses to U.S. global warfare and surveillance. This concern stems from the argument that visual and conceptual frames have contributed to the manufacture and obliterating of populations as objects of knowledge and targets of war. The links between vision and epistemology have been well theorized and rehearsed. From these studies we learn that perspectival vision is in fact constitutive of the logic of surveillance and the materiality of war. As the eye became the privileged organ of knowledge and authority, the power to see became equated with the power to know and to dominate. Throughout the twentieth century we see this enduring alliance between vision and war. As military fields increasingly became reconfigured as fields of visual perception, preparations for war increasingly became indistinguishable from the preparations needed to make a film. Rey Chow, for instance, writes, “War would mean the production of maximal visibility and...
illumination for the purpose of maximal destruction." We might conceive of the long war, then, as Anne McClintock observes, not only as a struggle over "oil, water, and the resources of globalization but [also quite centrally a struggle over the] control of the global image and data worlds." 

Given the dense interconnectivity among vision, knowledge, and warfare, what system of knowing and writing might adequately address both the violence the imperial state tries to render invisible and the "invisible obscene," as McClintock puts it, of civilian populations exposed endlessly to this violence? We benefit from turning away from the visual and discursive frames of war and toward analyses that feature lesser studied senses, including touch and sound. These extravisual sensory relations have become newly vital to U.S. security governance, both as actual military weapons (the use of music in torture) and as resources for diasporic public cultures. However, rather than dispense with the visual altogether, we benefit from attending more closely to the ambiguities and particularities of the visual experience produced by diasporic and racialized subjects responding to these conditions as they reveal alternative clues for knowing and mapping the world. I trace this line of thinking back through the performances of Bilal, arguing that diasporic visual and performance art provides a particularly privileged terrain from which to interrogate the expansion of the U.S. global security state (its logics, frames, desires, and tactics), and it further offers a perspective from which we might develop alternatives to imagine and inhabit.

What the aesthetic works of Bilal make possible is an alternative sensorial understanding of the long war... and Counting is offered as a way of archiving both personal and collective traumas. Bilal is a blacklisted political refugee from Saddam-era Iraq mourning the loss of his brother, who was killed by a drone for simply being in the way—the "collateral damage" that belies the imprecision of the war machine as it misses its target. Bilal's use of tattooing and body art here is particularly instructive for reasons worth elaborating. First, we must contend with the map of Iraq tattooed onto Bilal's body. Although maps regularly function as instruments of centralized surveillance, as tactics of information retrieval and war making, the cartography that Bilal quite literally prints on his back resonates instead with what the literary historian Jonathan Flattley calls an "affective map," that is, a map that "not only gives us a view of a terrain shared with others in the present but also traces the paths, resting places, dead ends and detours we might share with those who came before us." 

Flattley's work allows for a reconsideration of Bilal's individual art practices as part of a larger epistemological project engaged in a politics of knowledge.
one that has collective and social effects. When viewing Bilal’s performance, we are asked to think about individual and collective pain, sorrow, mourning, loss, and hope concurrently. To think of Bilal’s pain—that is, to give it shape and meaning—is necessarily to attempt an account of collective pain and loss for Iraqis around the globe, a diaspora whose connective tissue is felt and forged in bloodshed, death, and related miseries produced by the state of permanent war. Bilal’s performances of pain (and the mourning that emanates from his pieces) are hence not solely metaphors but also “evidence of the historicity of [his and our] subjectivity.”

Yet it is important to note that the source of this affective connection is the artist’s own skin—that sensory organ of touch and feeling that sutures the body to the social world. Thus while this performance is surely a visual experience for his audience, it is only through the tactile—where we are asked to confront Bilal’s body in pain—that this affective relation to past histories is drawn. It is touch, not vision, that provides this affective relationality and makes possible new ways of conceptualizing the self and others. This impulse to “touch the past” by charting the “dead ends and detours” shared with those who came before him thus becomes crucial in specifying Bilal’s sensorial interventions, as it suggests another way of archiving the long war.

Queer Calculus of Pain and Deadly Inscriptions

While arguing for an alternative archival relation to U.S. security wars, I want to briefly elaborate on the concept of a queer calculus as an interpretative framework salient to this discussion. Calculus in mathematics refers to a particular method or system of reasoning. Central to my concern here are questions of expertise, mastery, and evidence—concepts finely calibrated to serve the super-panoptic ambitions of the United States in the long war. How does the U.S. global security archipelago “see”? How does it know what it knows about its citizens, subjects, economies, and geographies? I am interested in the forms of modern security expertise and the knowledge practices through which security threats are visualized, rationalized, and managed (thus highlighting the aerial perspective, or paying close attention to what is up in the air).

While the politics of global knowledge production have long been central to postcolonial criticism, the topic remains noticeably underinvestigated in critical ethnic and queer studies. My project responds by analyzing the complex array of knowledge producers who together produce a wide and divergent set of claims about the state of contemporary global racial regimes of security and the evidence of its archives. Unlike security planners and military intellectuals, however, cultural producers like Bilal do not claim any relationship to expert knowledge. Their work instead highlights the random, provisional, indiscriminate, and altogether uncoordinated ways in which material resistance to imperial violence erupts. Indeed it is this mode of queerness that we might elaborate in our work by employing reading practices that denaturalize or queer—that is, make strange—processes like security and warfare that rely upon the presumption of their naturalness, thus unmooring sexuality as the fixed referent for queer studies.

The other, less circulated sense of calculus is biological in origin. This notion of calculus underscores the role of affects, sensations, and embodiment. In medicine, calculus (or calcification) describes the concretion of minerals formed within the body, in places like the kidney and gall bladder. This process is often painful, as these stones prove to be difficult to displace or dissolve. Their destructive power accrues as they grow in number, wreaking havoc on different organs, first one by one and then on the system as a whole. This organic sense of calculus also conjures the idea of residue, a palimpsestic view of time that carries with it the sedimentation of older histories, encounters, and legacies of violence. This interpretation opens up a particularly generative way of describing the long war as a violent, corporeal process working on racialized populations and bodies. It allows me to accentuate not only the sensorial and somatic life of empire but also the sedimentation of different forms of violence over time. An account of the queer calculus of the long war thus takes up the conjointed biological and discursive meanings of the phrase to capture how affects, fantasies, sentiments, and the senses have figured in and mattered to the shaping of U.S. imperial statecraft and its resistance from the late cold war through and beyond the Global War on Terror.

Bilal’s queer calculus of pain thus demands a more complex relation to the ensemble of the senses. We achieve better conceptual clarity on the operations of killing and violence perfected in the theaters of the long war by isolating touch and other modes of affective transmission that circumvent the visual field, that might even contradict the scopic altogether. The critical import of turning to the tactile realm stems from the hope that knowing through touch might elicit an alternative, sometimes contradictory conceptualization of social relations than that offered by visually based epistemologies. Sensations can reveal an account of feeling otherwise inaccessible to the regime of the visible and might make possible other ways of organizing collective social life beyond the logic of security. The idea here is not simply to discard the visual register but to elaborate a fuller epistemology that understands touch in relation to sight and other sensorial processes.
amalgamation of memory, imagination and pain,” thereby suggesting the failure of vision and the impossibility of transparent access to the effects of the long war in its operations of killing and violence.27

If a queer account of this work rejects the politics of enumeration, in its place we are left simply to confront Bilal’s back under black light. His back is transformed by the tattoo performance into a craggy terrain that looks like the remnants of a surface scarred by cluster bombs and missile strikes. There are no numbers present. Instead the assemblage of tattoos conjures the heat of burn märks, the glow of a starry night, the faint impression of a galaxy or cosmos from outer space, or satellite imagery, which is all too pervasive in this era of global positioning systems. Yet we should recall that this view from above is permanently imprinted on his skin.

Finally, while there is no official tradition of body art in Iraq, Bilal’s use of tattooing powerfully captures the missing history of the disappeared. In an interview the artist recounts how, while living in a refugee camp as a young person in Saudi Arabia after escaping Iraq in 1991, he was granted asylum in the United States on the condition that the U.S. delegation interrogate his brother first, also in the camp.28 One of the American translators who befriended Bilal informed him that Americans would not take three kinds of people: criminals, communists, and people with tattoos. Bilal’s brother had a tattoo, and the reason that he got it was related to the war. During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s many young people lost family members on the front lines, and their bodies came back unidentifiable. Young Iraqis started getting tattoos of their names and cities, sometimes on one or two of their body parts, so that if they were killed and their bodies were mutilated beyond recognition, their families would still be able to identify them. If the Americans saw the tattoo on his brother’s arm—this inscription of a future death—they would not grant Bilal asylum. That night Bilal’s brother decided to burn the tattoo off his arm using a hot spoon.29

Here we see a paradoxical queer calculus at work: in order to gain access to refuge in the United States one needs to efface this other, unseen record of the bodily effects of U.S. proxy war in the Middle East, as evidenced by U.S. participation in and financing of the Iran-Iraq War. Bilal’s story captures the nexus of the body in pain and the violence of the regulatory security state as it reveals the evidence of the somatic and sensorial life of empire. In short, the burned-off tattoo provides “material evidence of power’s whereabouts.”30 What lies outside the visual archive are these sense memories and feelings that conjure affective attachments full of individual, familial, and collective histories and that escape or elide official archives of war.

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Critically analyzing Bilal’s work thus better captures the sensorial logics of imperial governance and its manifold resistance. In the midst of enduring bloodshed in Afghanistan and Iraq, population displacements and drone attacks in Pakistan and Yemen, the drumbeat of war against Iran, the normalization of intensified disciplinary tactics against racialized immigrant and nonimmigrant people of color in the United States, and the complex unfolding of imaginative geographies of liberation across the Middle East and North Africa today, a queer relation to these war archives advances critical genealogies of the long war and its affective afterlives. Our political imaginations have been impoverished by the prevailing logics of state security in discourses of terrorism, militarism, and war. Analyzing diasporic archives, and specifically experimental performance works, as epistemological projects engaged in a politics of knowledge offers a moment of refreshment—an opportunity to think antiracist, anti-imperialist queer politics anew. An analysis of long war diasporic culture lets us move beyond the calculus of counterinsurgency to propose urgently needed alternatives to security, militarism, and war. A queer calculus of the long war thus provides blueprints for sensuous affiliations as expansive as the Pentagon’s long war, without the violence of its vision.

NOTES

1. My use of the term the long war refers to the Pentagon’s counterinsurgent defense strategy in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, and beyond. Imagined as a permanent cold war against Al Qaeda with small “hot wars” along the way, the long war provides a geopolitical frame through which the United States has come to know itself and its enemy Others in the Global South.
4. See Butler, Frames of War.
5. In a forthcoming manuscript I analyze the ways innovative state practices of coding, aggregating, managing, and dividing populations under contemporary forms of securitization have produced new populations, with differing degrees of precarity in relation to the state and its various apparatuses, while scrambling older ones. This project seeks to contribute to studies of U.S. racial formation by thinking through the complex intersections of foreign and domestic policy, citizenship and governance in the context of longer genealogies of colonial violence, decolonization, migration, and present-day forms of less spectacular racial dehumanizations.
6. I allude here to the Human Terrain System (HTS), run by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. HTS was billed as an effort to counteract the security and intelligence communities’ perceived inadequate cultural and historical knowledge and
cultural-interpretive capacities in the Middle East and South Asia. In a forthcoming work I offer a more detailed analysis of what constitutes the human terrain, both for the U.S. warfare state and for the interconnected movements that are working to oppose its particular strand of violence. This includes analyzing the relation among these art interventions, their global circuits, and the broader political coalitions necessary to forge global political challenges to U.S.-led imperial wars and violent neoliberalisms.


8. Tadari, “The War to Be Human.”

9. The political theorist Kiren Aziz Chaudhry’s essay on U.S. militarism along the Af-Pak border, “Dis(e)membering [Pâ-ki-stân],” provides an important source for my understanding of the changing geopolitical dimensions of the region. In a forthcoming work I elaborate on the politics of the “Af-Pak” designation, both the geopolitical implications for the region and for area studies projects more generally. This joins a larger collective argument that examines how Pakistan has increasingly become disentangled from “South Asia” and newly sutured to the “Middle East,” given its renewed importance as a failed state and reluctant collaborator in the U.S. Global War on Terror over the past decade.

10. In his analysis of global Muslim racial formations, “More than Nothing,” Rana describes Domestic Tension, following Butler, as an “aesthetic of grievability.”

11. 3rdi’s first images were captured in Doha on December 14, 2010. The images are often quite mundane, sometimes cryptic, but always antimonumental. The artwork is part of the museum’s first exhibit, entitled Told/Untold/Retold, featuring twenty-three contemporary artists from the Arab world. In a mirrored room forty-two monitors display images from Bilal’s online archive. The images are uploaded every minute with the GPS location. The speed of the changing pictures is altered according to the museum visitor’s movements. Bilal created a series of platforms: viewers in the museum, viewers online, those willingly or unwillingly captured on camera. The piece provides an important commentary in the context of debates on privacy amid proliferating personal data on the internet. See the images at http://www.3rdi.me/.

12. On the links between vision and warfare, see Kaplan, “Dead Reckoning” and “Mobility and War.” See also Ngo, “Sense and Subjectivity.”


17. On collateral damage, see Yoneyama, Hiroshima Traces; Feldman, “The Structuring Enemy and Archival War.”

18. Flatley, Affective Mapping, 1. On the early cold war production of spatial knowledge as a weapon of war, see Farish, The Contours of America’s Cold War; Dalby, “The Pentagon’s New Imperial Cartography.”

19. My thinking on the alternative epistemological projects of Asian American cultural forms is most directly indebted to Chuh, Imagine Otherwise; Kim, Ends of Empire.


21. Here I evoke Dinshaw’s evocative metaphor of touch, which suggests that historical inquiry can be motivated by an affective relation between past and present rather than mere causalities alone. See Dinshaw, Getting Medieval.

22. This framework builds on and is informed by the writings of women of color and queer of color intellectuals who have complicated conventional genealogies of queer studies by radically altering the proper objects of the field, critiquing multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. These works further interrogate the differential social processes that produce and sustain normative constructions of the nation-state, citizenship, migration, imperialism, and empire. My formulation of a queer calculus draws on and extends this genealogy of queer of color criticism and transnational queer studies through a more direct engagement with the national security apparatus and discourses of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.


25. Gómez-Barris and Gray, Toward a Sociology of the Trace, 5.


29. Bilal and Lydersen, Shoot An Iraqi, 140.

30. Gómez-Barris and Gray, Toward a Sociology of the Trace, 6.