

FEAR IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: U.S. CULTURAL ANXIETY  
AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF STRESS

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, narratives circulating throughout a variety of societal landscapes emphasize the danger the country's populace faces. This creates an overall stressful environment, with the result often manifesting itself in bigotry that seems to resist facts. For instance, the racism undergirding President Trump's Muslim ban continues to persist, despite an availability of information indicating Muslims aren't any sort of meaningful threat. This dissertation examines how underexamined fear narratives affect cultural discussions like the War on Terror, social media, gun violence, and the January 6th riot in Washington DC. In analyzing texts across politics, entertainment, journalism, and academic scholarship, I illustrate how fear operates in both explicit and subtle ways. As I argue, this results in a variety of cultural discussions where people opt for the "comfort" of well-cultivated fear tropes instead of engaging with complicated societal concerns. Myriad fear narratives (of which I analyze just four) work together to ensure people are always reminded of the danger they're in. The collective fear, as a chronic source of stress, then lessens the likelihood of any one fear association disappearing. This means that trying to address prejudice of varying types, as humanists frequently do, is a losing proposition and explains why people often seem to ignore facts. In drawing upon psychology and neurology, I further the fields of American studies and affect theory in explaining how an understanding of human physiology helps explain these contentious arenas. I argue we need a theory of fear that builds upon established scientific research and presents a roadmap for addressing both individual fear discourses, and how they function together in the aggregate.

## INTRODUCTION: THE AGE OF FEAR

No moniker better encapsulates 21<sup>st</sup> century America than the Age of Fear. It dominates political and cultural discussions, underlies news coverage, and has a distinct vocabulary all its own in phobias. Fear might be universal in the abstract, but its power comes from how people situate themselves in a given fear discourse: Donald Trump's proposed Muslim ban "works" only if his audience recognizes itself as potential victims and Muslims as the perpetrators. That relationship has been solidified due to repetition in a variety of places, which is why despite there being only 107 Islamic terrorism fatalities in the US since 9/11, the War on Terror continues to dominate public discussion.<sup>1</sup> In the same time period, there have been between 20-40 dog-related fatalities every year.<sup>2</sup> Pause for a moment and imagine the bombast and vitriol of today's political and social commentators, but instead of the War on Terror, they're vehemently debating dog policy. Ridiculous yes, but only because cynophobia (a fear of dogs) is such a foreign concept when it comes to large-scale societal debates, whereas Islamophobia is part of American culture. Neurology and psychology (along with existing humanities scholarship) can help explain this disparity, in focusing on how people build and maintain fear associations. Doing so allows us to examine the ideological work of fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; that is, where it comes from, why it's effective, and what it does.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bergen, and David Sterman. "What Is the Threat to the United States Today?" Terrorism in America After 9/11. New America, September 10, 2021. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/what-is-the-threat-to-the-united-states-today/>.

<sup>2</sup> "U.S. Dog Bite Fatalities - Dog Bite Statistics." DogsBite.org. Lynn Media Group, 2022. <https://www.dogsbite.org/dog-bite-statistics-fatalities.php>.

As a field, American studies places a premium on this idea of ideological work through the discipline's examination of power and how people resist and disrupt those systems. This manifests itself in scholarship that examines the end result of fear, yet how those fears arise often slips by the wayside. For example, in *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*, Paula Ioanide examines affect economies involving things like police violence in black communities and anti-immigrant sentiment in southern California. Her solution channels the current ethos of American studies, in that she champions community involvement that empowers those who have been subjected to the different types of oppressive regimes found throughout US society. Empowering people to resist abusive power systems is something worthy of support, but we also need to be aware of how those power systems arise in the first place, as this is necessary to fully stop them or prevent new ones from forming. Ioanide briefly addresses this in mentioning the psychology of affect, but she doesn't examine why people opt for feelings instead of facts. Her analysis is an examination of what happens when affect rules the day and facts become meaningless, but why that happens isn't a major component of her work. This gap is what my analysis brings to the American studies table: an explanation of the science of fear and then how those various fear tropes circulate throughout American culture and impact a variety of political and social issues.

This introduction lays out the scientific and humanistic principles I rely on in later chapters, but even here I'd like to begin with a smaller introduction that includes three major components of fear theory. The psychology of fear is complicated in its own right, but examining its circulation in a variety of discursive arenas (which have complications and nuances of their own) presents for an unwieldy and convoluted analysis. Briefly mentioning three principles at

the outset will, I hope, give readers a starting point for how to interpret the psychological and neurological scholarship I explain later.

1. People don't "choose" what to be afraid of, yet at the same time, not everyone has the same fear, so in some ways fear is a learned response. This is both the most important and the most complicated part of my analysis, and psychology and neurology are vital in navigating this paradoxical component.
2. Fear gains its power in the aggregate. While certain texts might carry more societal prestige, fear operates throughout a variety of mediums ensuring it's an ever-present factor. At the same time, it's often ignored due to its banality, a product of society being steeped in fear narratives.
3. Humans are predisposed to build fear associations with those who look and sound different, but those very predispositions can be altered through active learning. Understanding how this happens allows us to work towards "fear extinction," which involves eliminating fear discourses that give rise to problematic political and cultural ideologies.

These three components are the driving scientific elements of my analysis and the basis for the arguments I make in later chapters. Foregrounding them at the outset assists in making a massive and messy topic manageable.

Each subsequent chapter contains a separate argument, yet my ultimate thesis is that a variety of fear narratives work together to ensure fears never go away. In large part, this is a product of how humans deal with stress. Stress, in this case a product of myriad fear narratives reminding the country of the danger it faces, impairs the ability of people to unlearn fear

associations. Thus, I argue no single fear narrative will be outright eliminated unless we take a holistic approach that focuses on how all the seemingly disparate fears operate. For instance, Donald Trump utilized a fear of Muslims to increase his political appeal, and while pointing out the bigotry inherent in his rhetoric is important, it's impossible to eliminate that specific cultural fear when there are so many others circulating throughout the country. In short, in 21<sup>st</sup> century US society, myriad unrelated fear narratives end up augmenting each other, ensuring none of them disappear.

Fear discourses dominate the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet we would be wise to forgo arguing about which fears are rational and which are not. When it comes to fear, rational and irrational are flawed descriptors. For Americans who fear Muslims are trying to infiltrate and destroy the country, a fear trigger generates an affect that is just as real as someone preparing to skydive for the first time. Reading a sensationalist news report about the danger posed by Muslims could generate a very real physiological response (fear). Saying that response is an irrational fear misunderstands what the body does when someone is scared. People don't "choose" to be afraid of Muslims any more than I "choose" to be afraid of spiders. Yet, those two fears are not at all equal, as being afraid of spiders doesn't cause any trouble, but a fear of Muslims leads to discriminatory policies and dangerous situations for Arab/Muslim looking people throughout the country. Both fears are real, but certain fears are more problematic for a society.

To make fear even more complicated, not everyone has the same responses to the same triggers/situations, and some even overcome fears, which means that in some ways fear is a learned response. For example, I started rock climbing almost twenty years ago when I took an

undergraduate Intro to Rock Climbing course. In the beginning I was a bit scared of heights, but nowhere near as scared as some of the other students or some of the people I've tried to introduce to climbing over the years. There might still be times I'm a bit nervous given unique situations (watching a storm roll in or climbing with someone new), but heights, by themselves, no longer bother me. Essentially, I've learned not to be afraid of a very common fear (heights) when that very same fear outright prevented people from getting into climbing. Understanding the biology of fear is important because it helps us navigate these apparent paradoxes in which fear is both outside the realm of human control, but also something that people have a degree of control over.

Addressing fear requires more than simply identifying how fear circulates in a given discourse. A theory of fear, as I hope to present, will lay out how we can identify fear discourses and then fix them. This requires what psychologists refer to as "fear extinction," in which people actively learn something isn't worth being afraid of. I end "Overtly Hidden Terror" (chapter 3) with a close reading of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* for this reason, in that her graphic memoir presents a complex perspective on Iranian life. This is the type of text necessary to disrupt the ingrained Islamophobic tropes (where all Muslim characters are connected to terrorism) found throughout US society. Simply identifying the ways fear circulates throughout American War on Terror discourse won't be enough to eliminate those fears and the accompanying policy decisions that arise out of them.

Fear discourses derive their power from the fact that in isolated instances they aren't all that memorable, but in the aggregate, they can have major impacts on how people construct their worlds. A fear of digital technology (chapter 2) has taken root in the US thanks to a dominant

logic that views digital spaces as less real, less human, and more dangerous. Entertainment franchises like *The Matrix* and *Terminator* showcase the danger of what can happen when societies become too enmeshed in technology. While no one leaves the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger movie terrified about the rise of the machines, the idea that technology is dangerous and leading our society down a path towards destruction pops up in myriad cultural texts, ranging from scholarly articles that examine social media to documentaries like *The Social Dilemma*. This leads to another important component of my analysis, in that fear, thanks to its prominent circulation, often coopts societal conversations. For instance, fear-based texts surrounding the role of social media and smartphones in education cease to be about those tools and their place within a larger educational landscape and more about how they are outright ruining education.

No single text defines these different fear discourses: they all function together, and thanks to their ubiquity, they become nondescript, effectively hiding in plain sight. These fears can still impact how people think, even if they're not aware of it. Social scientist Ryan Enos found that people's opinions on the danger posed by Hispanic immigrants were negatively impacted when they were in the mere presence of Spanish speakers.<sup>3</sup> I go into greater detail regarding this specific finding and what it means for Islamophobic discourse in chapter three, but the important thing to remember is that our beliefs are shaped by many different factors, some of which we might not even be aware of.

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan D. Enos, "Causal Effect of Intergroup Contact on Exclusionary Attitudes," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 10 (2014): 3699–3704.

These various fear discourses present American society with frequent stressors, and there's neurological and psychological evidence this type of consistent, chronic stress has negative effects on human cognition and ensures fears never disappear. In *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky offers a summary of the long-term effects of chronic stress:

Sustained stress has numerous adverse effects. The amygdala becomes overactive and more coupled to pathways of habitual behavior; it is easier to learn fear and harder to unlearn it. We process emotionally salient information more rapidly and automatically, but with less accuracy. Frontal function – working memory, impulse control, executive decision making, risk assessment, and task shifting – is impaired, and the frontal cortex has less control over the amygdala. And we become less empathic and prosocial. Reducing sustained stress is a win-win for us and those stuck around us.<sup>4</sup>

Sapolsky doesn't say it explicitly, but his point is clear: sustained stress makes people dumb. It diminishes cognitive abilities, heightens more aggressive and less thoughtful responses to things like fear triggers, and once those responses have been strengthened through repetition, they're remarkably hard to break. While I analyze fears of technology, Muslims, and guns, there are many other fear discourses circulating throughout American culture and society, and as a chronic source of stress, they all work together to limit the ability of people to think and unlearn fears.

Sapolsky's explanation of sustained stress contains a fair amount of jargon, and I'll go through the parts of the brain he's referencing later, but a thought experiment can help illustrate the point he's making. Imagine being attacked by a bear on your way to work. This is an acute stressor, but it would shift towards chronic if you were attacked by a bear frequently on your

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 136.

morning commute. Assuming you survive those attacks, what would that looming sense of fear do to you, knowing there might be a bear waiting along your morning commute? This is by no means a likely scenario, but it's easy to change it into something much more plausible: what if you thought you were in danger of being attacked by a bear every morning? How would that imagined threat affect your life? While we don't live in a society that's inundated with fear narratives about bear attacks, we are frequently reminded about the toxicity of social media, the danger of terrorism, and that thousands of people die every year due to gun violence. This leads to a vital point in understanding fear, in that humans create the stressful environment their bodies respond to by thinking about the danger society faces.

21<sup>st</sup> century American lives are ruled by fear narratives that cause people to think their way into dangerous situations, and this, in turn, limits the country's ability to have substantive conversations about pressing issues. It's humankind's ability to imagine danger that matters most here, a point explained by David Berreby in *Us & Them: The Science of Identity*: "Most animals feel stress when they sense danger. Humans feel stress when they *imagine* danger."<sup>5</sup> A preponderance of fear narratives means people are consistently reminded of their perilous situation, and in most cases, their responses are based on an imagined fear. Berreby doesn't examine how fear circulates throughout various cultural arenas, but the point he makes about imagined danger holds true for 21<sup>st</sup> century America where a variety of texts constantly remind citizens they should be afraid. This project puts these two camps in conversation with each other: humanities scholars that examine how ideas (often a product of cultural representations) circulate

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<sup>5</sup> David Berreby, *Us and Them the Science of Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 259.

throughout society and psychologists and neurologists who examine what happens to people when they're afraid and stressed.

### Locating Fear in American Studies

The field of American studies has had an uneasy relationship with methodology since its inception, given the scope of its original task was analyzing American culture. Today, conceptions of national identity aren't as important as they were for the first generation of scholars, but the idea of texts and their cultural import continues, albeit in an updated way. Janice Radaway writes that in the current conception of the field, "events, institutions, organizations, and even objects themselves such as books, films, paintings, and different technological forms more generally tend to be treated as the contingent, only temporarily fixed result of a complex and always contested set of social practices."<sup>6</sup> It's no longer the texts – by themselves – that matter. Instead, American studies focuses on the constantly evolving and changing relationship between culture and its artifacts, with both simultaneously reflecting and constituting each other. An analysis of fear follows a similar path, in that a variety of fear logics circulate throughout society, and texts both reflect those logics and help establish those same logics as valid and meaningful. Stepping back, we can think of fear as an underexamined set of social practices, and this dissertation aims to begin a dialogue with the circulation of fear in a variety of 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural landscapes.

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<sup>6</sup> Janice A. Radway et al., eds., "Introduction," in *American Studies: An Anthology* (Madden, MA: Wiley- Blackwell, 2009), pp. 1-6, 5.

In her introduction to *The Myths that Made America*, Heike Paul lays out the three major paradigm shifts that have occurred since the field found its footing in post-war America.<sup>7</sup> The first generations of American studies scholars were the Myth and Symbol School. These figures sought to define a unique American essence built around a vague (yet powerful and present) notion of American exceptionalism. Most notably, they looked to moments of westward expansion as offering insight into what made the country unique. Paul notes a profound shift came about in the 1960s and 1970s, as a number of academics noticed that Myth and Symbol School scholarship was largely, if not entirely, white and male: “the dominant version of American beginnings, which had been privileging certain groups while marginalizing or entirely leaving out others, was no longer accepted as representative of *the* American experience.”<sup>8</sup> This second era became known as the Critical Myth and Symbol School, and while they didn’t outright reject the arguments of the first generation, they augmented and altered them to take into account previously-ignored voices (most notably women and people of color). American mythology began to include a larger swath of the country in terms of who contributes to the making of the country. The third era was that of the New Americanists who came to prominence in the 90s and outright rejected the notion of a national identity: “The so-called New Americanists questioned the nation as framework on the basis of a postnational or transnational and possibly post-exceptionalist agenda, and articulated a critique of the American empire.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 18-25.

<sup>8</sup> Paul, 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Paul, 25.

This is the idea that still dominates the field to this day, in that a nation-state is not the defining, be-all way to think about human existence. Instead, trans-national scholarship that examines things like capitalism, race, and indigeneity (myths and symbols can still be applicable) are best thought of as networks that transcend national borders.

We can chart this change by comparing two essays that tackle prominent literature and their cultural import and doing so will also help situate my analysis of fear in an unwieldy American studies historiography. The beginnings of American studies, as a discipline, can be found in Henry Nash Smith's 1950s essay "Can American Studies Develop a Method," where, as his title suggests, he wrestles with a question that continues to plague today's scholars. Smith takes issue with a then-dominant form of literary criticism, New Historicism, that was interested only in the text; the cultural milieu mattered not one bit. In examining Mark Twain, Smith argues for a combination of literary scholarship and sociological analysis: "What is needed is a method of analysis that is at once literary (for one must begin with an analytical reading of the texts that take into account structure, imagery, diction, and so on) and sociological (for many of the forces at work in the fiction are clearly of social origin)."<sup>10</sup> Smith combines sociological research and literary analysis in examining the work of Mark Twain, noting the class structure present when Twain was writing manifested itself in the diction of his characters and limited what Twain was "allowed" to write. Furthermore, Smith argues Twain's writing, throughout his career, was greatly affected by his rise to social prominence. In order to understand American culture and

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?," in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 1-12, 5.

American literature, people need to interrogate both the texts themselves and their social context, examining how they play off and affect each other. As Smith draws to a close, he encourages a methodology that will be a “collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry.”<sup>11</sup> American studies has continued in this manner, in that scholarship is frequently a grab bag of disciplines and methodologies. Its interdisciplinarity is one of its unique components when put in comparison with other academic realms.

Yet, in returning to Paul’s summary of the field’s evolution, current scholars would find fault with some of Smith’s ideas. After all, it’s “men” that are doing this research, and in identifying Mark Twain as the figure he will explore, Smith writes, “No other American writer of comparable importance is so unmistakably of the people.”<sup>12</sup> The larger point Smith makes (that analyzing literature needs to take into account the environment it was produced and received in) is just as relevant today as it was when his essay was first published in 1957, but it includes flaws later scholars identified and tried to remedy: white men were what mattered when it came to both the production of great cultural texts and their analysis.

Published almost sixty years later, Joseph Darda’s analysis of mythology surrounding American war veterans serves as a useful juxtaposition to Nash’s initial foray into crafting an American studies method.<sup>13</sup> In “Like a Refugee: Veterans, Vietnam, and the Making of a False

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Darda, “Like a Refugee: Veterans, Vietnam, and the Making of a False Equivalence,” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 2019): pp. 83-104.

Equivalence,” Darda examines how cultural texts like Tom Petty’s “Like a Refugee” and Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” contributed to a societal landscape where the idea of a refugee was constituted as a white, male, soldier who, upon returning from Vietnam, found himself alienated from his country. Darda incorporated public policy into his analysis as well, in explaining how the Refugee Act of 1980 “sought to limit and legalize the definition of refugee” to account for the massive influx of Southeast Asian peoples who were fleeing conflicts in Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>14</sup> At the same time though, the idea of refugee “became a free floating cultural signifier that could name an estranged lover in a Tom Petty song or a white veteran of the Vietnam War.”<sup>15</sup> In particular, Springsteen’s wildly successful (still to this day) song tells the story of “an all-American boy who served his country in Southeast Asia and returned to a hometown of shuttered factories and vacant storefronts.”<sup>16</sup> That idea of the white male body being mistreated, born out of Vietnam-era culture, continues to this day. An entire genre of Vietnam veteran memoirs developed in the 1980s, with the most notable one being Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (a text that dominates high school curricula). Works like this, along with mainstream journalism that chronicled older veterans returning to Vietnam and gaining closure, are vital in crafting a pervasive feeling that veterans in the US are the real refugees of global conflict. For the most part, actual refugee stories go unacknowledged in the public arena.

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<sup>14</sup> Darda, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Darda, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Darda, 84.

We can see both the traces of Smith's essay and the changes Paul chronicles in Darda's examination. Darda analyzes myriad texts and their relationship to an ever-changing set of social practices. Novels, government policy decisions tied to refugees, songs, mainstream journalism, and political dialogue all circulate within a cultural setting that takes advantage of foreign events (wars) that then define internal social and political struggles. Darda ties this to the Middle East in pointing out that major books and movies that have come out of the US's two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan portray the American military as predominantly white, when this isn't the case. Then, this allows Trump to rant about an American need to support veterans (the real victims of these conflicts) instead of immigrants. For Darda, it's this decades-long emphasis on white male veterans as the real victims of war that has allowed Donald Trump to rise to political power. He draws his argument to a close by writing,

The wounded veteran has acted as a vessel for a new form of white identity politics that can be heard when now-president Trump sets Iraq vets against Syrian refugees fleeing military violence and black football players protesting police brutality. It is a story that mixes white supremacy with a belief in white oppression, allowing white men to see themselves as simultaneously the most deserving and the most vulnerable, embodiments of the nation and exiles from it. It is a powerful and poisonous story that first emerged from a selective remembrance of the war in Southeast Asia that remade the American veteran as, in Tom Petty's words, like a refugee.<sup>17</sup>

For Darda (and the current field of American studies), defining societal values, like what makes a refugee, through the artistic expression of white men creates problems for the society as a whole as it leads to the election of a figure like Trump. Whereas for Smith and his compatriots, focusing on established white intellectuals was the obvious choice for academic inquiry: society would be better if more time and energy were devoted to works of literary giants like Mark

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<sup>17</sup> Darda, 101.

Twain. Darda greatly expands what we should be thinking about when it comes to American culture, and in particular, the cultural significance of a refugee.

Darda focuses on issues within the borders of the United States, yet that's done to further the overall aims of American studies. The way large-scale societal conversations privilege certain groups connects to very real political movements. Here, a false equivalence between refugees and veterans allows populist politicians like Donald Trump to rise to power, and that aggrieved nature he traffics in then manifests itself in immigration and refugee policies. While Darda doesn't go as far as to offer a pedagogical imperative to eliminate texts like *The Things They Carried* from school curriculums, his argument is that teaching those texts as defining the Vietnam War is problematic. He's noting a cultural problem by analyzing myriad texts, and then presenting a way to address it (read actual refugee memoirs).

My analysis of fear follows a similar path, and while it might not fit in with current transnational conceptions of identity, my overall goal furthers the field's ethos. Initial Americanists were of the belief that analyzing cultural texts would offer insight into American character. That rings true today, but in a slightly different way. For example, in highlighting how the idea of a refugee has developed over decades in a variety of cultural arenas (a contested social practice), Darda offers insight into why the "veterans vs. immigrants" debate continually circulates in American political discourse. Thinking about fear furthers his argument because of what it tells us about representations. Established psychology scholarship tells us that people empathize with those who look and sound like them and that they build and maintain fear associations faster and stronger with those who look and sound different. This helps explain why the dominant group in the US (white America) gravitates towards stories like Tim O'Brien's *The*

*Things They Carried* instead of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, despite, as Darda notes, the military being quite diverse. Theorizing fear, as a set of underexamined social practices offers similar revelations and helps explain some recurring US cultural tropes.

The greatest contribution of Smith's essay is his imperative to look across disciplinary boundaries when there is a problem. The point about analyzing texts and their connection to culture is, at this time, gospel for American studies scholarship. However, the underlying argument there is that when scholars identify a hole in current methodology, they need to look outside the realm of accepted practices to address it. For example, there's no shortage of scholars who examine Islamophobic tropes found throughout 21<sup>st</sup> century politics, entertainment, and culture, that then allow the US to continue disrupting the Middle East. What is lacking though, is an understanding of how people build and maintain fear associations with Arab/Muslim looking individuals and that relationship to Islamophobia. In opting for an interdisciplinary approach, I'm engaging in the same type of theorizing Smith was decades ago: current scholarship does a lot of things well, but there are some gaps that we need to address. Utilizing psychological and neurological scholarship offer guidance on how these fears originate and what we can do to remedy them.

### Literature Mapping

While I focus on three fear discourses in depth, fear is everywhere. In certain contexts, like Islamophobia, it's often obvious, but in others, like narratives surrounding social media, it's initially harder to see (a product of a fear of technology being deeply ingrained in US culture). Thus, *Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* analyzes a wide swath of texts in hopes of presenting a full picture of how individual fear discourses work. My textual analysis builds upon traditional humanities

scholarship, but in including neurology and psychology, my goal is to examine how human brains process texts imbricated in fear. Doing so presents a workable solution to the problems fear discourses create.

There are four broad categories of scholarship I rely on throughout this dissertation: affect theory, scientific research, representational scholarship, and historical analysis. The following is a mapping of the fundamental components and scholars on which I have further researched and built *Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Not every chapter includes overt references to these thinkers and ideas, but they are essential to the various fear narratives I examine.

Affect theory attempts to explain how emotions impact lived experience. Donovan O. Schaefer writes it “is an approach to history, politics, culture, and all other aspects of embodied life that emphasizes the role of nonlinguistic and non- or para-cognitive forces.”<sup>18</sup> While I focus only on fear, this dissertation’s fundamental drive is to look at the interplay of cognitive and non-cognitive forces and how they affect society. Affect theory tasks itself with an incredibly complicated topic, so a degree of obtuse, esoteric language is to be expected, yet Schaefer worries if this becomes the norm, a promising field will offer little in the way of practical guidance. Instead, Schaefer wants an affect theory that will “help to better diagnose, understand, and intervene in the formations of power.”<sup>19</sup> We shouldn’t be studying affect for the sake of studying affect; we should be studying affect because that can help us dismantle regimes of

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<sup>18</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect Theory: The Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Schaefer, 66.

oppression. So too do I hope to offer analysis of fear in a way that connects it to very concrete issues in American life.

Affect theorist Brian Massumi focuses on the imagined danger the American public faces, yet his analysis lacks any attempt at addressing the issue.<sup>20</sup> Massumi engages with the power of potential threat, which in the context of early 2000s American War on Terror, involved politicians like George W. Bush using language that drew attention to what could happen. As Massumi argues, even in the aftermath of a failed Iraq invasion where the US found no weapons of mass destruction and was forced to acknowledge Al Qaeda wasn't in Iraq, those actions were still justified because they "could have" been true. The country needed to take preemptive measures to ensure potential danger wasn't there. Massumi begins his essay with a question reminiscent of Berreby's comment on imagined danger by asking, "How could the nonexistence of what has not happened be *more* real than what is now observably over and done with?"<sup>21</sup> This is the basis for my chapter on Islamophobia, in that the threat of Islamic terror, found throughout a variety of cultural texts, leads to policy decisions that are not commensurate with the actual historical record. Massumi argues threat is operative (self-causative), and the fear narratives I examine are operative in the sense they're present in enough areas that they maintain themselves. However, this is a product of how human brains process fear triggers and maintain fear

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 52-70.

<sup>21</sup> Massumi, 52.

associations. Stopping with calling it operative, like Massumi does, misses this, an important point if you hope to remedy the fear discourse.

Paula Ioanide examines how emotions overrule facts in *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*. She orients her argument around “how U.S. publics dominantly feel about crime, terrorism, welfare, and immigration often seems to trump concrete facts and evidence about these politicized matters.”<sup>22</sup> She goes on to argue these emotions “function much like economies: they have mechanisms of circulation, accumulation, expression, and exchange that give them social currency, cultural legibility, and political power.”<sup>23</sup> For Ioanide, racist economies are so woven into the fabric of American life that facts can do little to change beliefs as the accompanying feelings are too powerful to be overridden by accurate information. Ioanide presents a solution in line with current American studies scholarship in arguing for community involvement. In presenting opportunities for people to share their experiences (she calls it ethical witnessing), the emotional affect that dominates local mindsets when it comes to something like policing practices, can be changed. That, in turn, would make citizens and lawmakers more receptive to new, accurate information.

My research is closest to Ioanide’s work, but I view my analysis as explaining the origins of the affect economies Ioanide examines, which can help remedy the very real and very concerning issues she broaches. At the same time, arguing this gets at an uncomfortable reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century power dynamics. In effect, Ioanide’s solution is a call to get local communities to

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<sup>22</sup> Paula Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ioanide, 2.

come together to fight bigotry within their neighborhoods. There is no doubt power in the activist organizing she chronicles, yet I'm not sure this will address the root cause, as the groups that hold the power (white America) seem absent from these gatherings. The emphasis seems to be on how those affected by these different affect economies come together and, through telling their stories, empower themselves and to a more limited extent, the community. This misses that the fears of white America drive policy decisions, something Ioanide frustratingly acknowledges: "Time and again we learned that elected representatives, legislators, police, and military officers – irrespective of their individual sentiments, goodness, and perspectives – were likely to follow logics, procedures, and practices whose outcomes were overwhelmingly unjust toward poor people and people of color in the United States and across the globe."<sup>24</sup> All the economies she examines (police violence against black people, abuse of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib, elimination of affordable housing in New Orleans, and anti-immigrant fervor in southern California) are tied to fear. For instance, police violence and anti-immigrant beliefs are predicated on the notion black and brown bodies are more dangerous than their white counterparts. Even discriminatory housing policies speak to the fear of "safe" neighborhoods being overrun by minorities. Ioanide does a phenomenal job of chronicling how economies of affect prevent people from accepting facts, yet she doesn't examine why those economies arise. Furthermore, while her conception of ethical witnessing is absolutely something that should continue, that – by itself – doesn't address fear. Examining the psychology of fear is necessary

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<sup>24</sup> Ioanide, 215.

because it clues us in to how we should go about eliminating the affective economies she examines.

Ioanide's argument is one that circulates in a variety of texts that feature American studies tropes and goals. Two ethnographies, Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* and Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in their own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, feature academics trying to understand why so many people seem to ignore facts in crafting their political and cultural worlds. Both scholars ask a question reminiscent of Ioanide: why do conservatives seem to vote for politicians and policies that go against their best interests? In talking about her home state of Wisconsin, Cramer argues rural Wisconsinites support Republican politicians due to a sense of place-based identity that is dominated by a feeling of resentment about taxes.<sup>25</sup> While not fear, she's engaging with a type of affect in that how people feel about their place within their state matters a great deal and seems to, at times, override the reality of their situation. Hochschild begins by wondering what those on the political right think about politics, explaining the impetus for her project was "a keen interest in how life feels to people on the right – that is, in the emotion that underlies politics."<sup>26</sup> Particularly, she plums the "Great Paradox," which in her work centers on why rural Louisianans, many of whom have myriad health problems and have seen their childhood environments destroyed by pollution, embrace Tea Party ideology that calls

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<sup>25</sup> Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2018), xi.

for less regulation on businesses. Neither Cramer nor Hochschild are American studies scholars per se, but both try to examine how feelings seem to override facts, which is detrimental to the people in their studies and to the country as a whole. I don't examine the type or rural/urban divide Cramer investigates, nor do I spend time delving into environmental issues, but I too am interested in examining how people feel. In particular, I focus on a specific type of feeling (fear) that circulates throughout 21<sup>st</sup> century US culture, which in turn factors into discussions involving technology, Muslims, and guns.

The most prominent component of existing biological scholarship as it pertains to my analysis of fear is what psychologists and neurologists often refer to as bottom-up and top-down influencing. The basis for bottom-up influencing is a Yale University study in which psychologists Lawrence E. Williams and John A. Bargh found people who were carrying cups of something warm reported warmer and friendlier opinions of people they just met, while those carrying something cold reported colder and less friendlier opinions of their new acquaintances.<sup>27</sup> In a more pop-culture vein, the Snickers commercial campaign, "You're not you when you're hungry," illustrates the same phenomenon. In the spots, a variety of people act unusual (grumpy) because they're hungry. When given a candy bar, they return to their normal selves. This is a play on a very real component of human physiology, in which the body's automatic processes dictate cognitive thought, which is why someone who is angry or terrified might not think like they normally do.

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence E. Williams and John A. Bargh, "Experiencing Physical Warmth Promotes Interpersonal Warmth," *Science* 322, no. 5901 (2008): pp. 606-607. It's worth noting this claim has been somewhat contentious, as later researchers have been unable to replicate these findings.

Top-down influencing, in which cognition affects physiology, also impacts how people think and behave. The Harvard Implicit Association Test illustrates this in a roundabout way: people make snap judgments before they have time to think about their decisions, and the test reveals some innate biases people might not be aware of. The concern is these biases could unwittingly affect other decisions (this is bottom-up influencing). For example, if I have internalized beliefs about a particular minority being lazy, the IAT would draw attention to that, with the hope being that when I have interactions dealing with those groups (or vote on accompanying candidates/policy), I'm cognizant of how that bias might be affecting how I feel and think. The premise of Harvard's project is to alert people of their biases in the hopes they can account for them. This correction is a variation of top-down influencing.

A more scientific understanding of top-down influencing comes from psychology studies that examine threat. Chang, Krosch, and Cikara review current psychological studies in "Effects on Intergroup Threat on Mind, Brain, and Behavior," and their summary argument is that "despite earlier beliefs that categorization, representation, and face-processing were impervious to top-down influence, this growing literature suggests intergroup threat is an important driver of low level cognitive and perceptual judgment processes."<sup>28</sup> Face categorization studies involve a continuum of faces. On one end would be a very black face with accompanying facial characteristics, and on the other end would be a very white face with accompanying facial characteristics. Researchers purposefully overlay these repeatedly until they get a variety, with the middle image being one where people would struggle to identify it either as white or black.

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<sup>28</sup> Linda W Chang, Amy R Krosch, and Mina Cikara, "Effects of Intergroup Threat on Mind, Brain, and Behavior," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (2016): 71.

In this case, what psychologists did was give certain participants articles about resource scarcity, e.g., as climate change continues it will be more and more difficult for people to get and maintain access to clean drinking water. Participants then categorized faces, and people who had been primed with a resource scarcity text identified more faces as being black than white. The idea being that when resources are scarce, it behooves people to identify more individuals as members of the outgroup and by extension, not deserving of those resources. The important point here is that top-down influencing can factor into automatic responses. While Chang, Krosch, and Cikara cover multiple psychology studies, the general idea they present is that being made aware of a threatening situation affects how people behave automatically. Their findings illustrate top-down influencing, in which being cognizant of outside forces does affect how people respond at a biological level to stimuli. In terms of my analysis of fear, this is important because it draws attention to how fear discourses create feedback loops. In the case of Islamophobia, a number of movies emphasize the danger Americans are in, which in turn unwittingly affects how an American populace goes about their lives.

Innate biological responses (like what the IAT tries to draw attention to) are often the basis for problematic othering, but these responses are by no means permanent. Humans are predisposed to favor those who look and sound like us, as psychologist Joshua Greene explains in *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. At six months, babies prefer to look at speakers without foreign accents, at ten months they prefer to accept toys from

native language speakers, and at five years prefer friends who lack foreign accents.<sup>29</sup> He goes on to point out the Implicit Association Test has found kids, as young as six, prefer those who look like themselves.<sup>30</sup> Humans have a well-documented, automatic preference for those who share similar characteristics, and they are also inclined to build fear associations more readily with others, which Sapolsky notes in examining what he calls prepared learning, a trait involving “being predisposed to be conditioned to fear people with a certain type of appearance.”<sup>31</sup> There’s a preponderance of evidence that people prefer those who look and sound similar to themselves, and it doesn’t take much to envision that being used as exculpatory evidence in discussions of bigotry. Sapolsky addresses this though in arguing:

Being afraid that the Them approaching you will rob you is rife with affect and particularism. But fearing that those Thems will take our jobs, manipulate the banks, dilute our bloodlines, make our children gay, etc., requires future-oriented cognition about economics, sociology, political science, and pseudoscience.<sup>32</sup>

It’s one thing to have a wired, or seemingly innate, response to someone who looks different, but it’s entirely different when that response turns into discriminatory policy that requires substantive cognitive thought. Despite chronicling the depressing way human brains seem predisposed to bigotry, Greene points out “being wired for tribalism does not mean being *hardwired* for tribalism. Brains can be rewired through experience and active learning. What’s more, our brains include many different circuits that compete for control of behavior, some of

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<sup>29</sup> Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 50.

<sup>30</sup> Greene, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Sapolsky, *Behave*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Sapolsky, 400.

which are more modifiable than others.”<sup>33</sup> Greene’s point mirrors Ioanide’s argument, in that people can learn not to be afraid, yet it’s not something that just happens. Islamophobia is a fear discourse predicated on bigotry, and psychology and neurology indicate it’s powerful because it preys on white America’s natural inclination to build fear associations with Muslim-looking people. At the same time, both disciplines state these innate responses are modifiable. Furthermore, even if they were permanent, as Sapolsky points out, there’s a difference between a split-second response to seeing someone who looks different and the substantive thought that goes into policy decisions.

Neurology helps in an analysis of fear discourses because fear involves multiple processes that aren’t entirely conscious: fear is both a learned and innate response. The biological underpinnings of fear require a degree of knowledge regarding the brain’s makeup, and it’s helpful to begin with a summary courtesy of “One Second Before,” the second chapter of Sapolsky’s *Behave*.<sup>34</sup> This starts by envisioning the brain as being made up of three layers (where the terminology of “top-down” and “bottom-up” influencing originate). The bottom, or layer 1, involves automatic regulatory processes: if you’re cold, the brain tells muscles to shiver to generate warmth. Layer 2 (limbic system) deals with responding to outside stimuli: you sense a predator, and this layer tells layer 1 to start preparing accordingly (the basis for “fight or flight”). Like layer 1, the body still does this automatically. The top, or layer 3, (the cortex) is where cognitive thought happens: you see a picture that reminds you of something terrifying

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<sup>33</sup> Greene, *Moral Tribes*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Sapolsky, “One Second Before,” in *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2017), pp. 21-80.

from your youth, layer 3 tells layer 2 you're scared, and layer 2 tells layer 1 to start producing the appropriate response. The most important point is that the cortex, or prefrontal cortex (PFC) in particular, can influence how layer 2 processes fear-based stimuli. Navigating this concept is the crux of fear theory and ultimately serves as the main connection between biology and humanities scholarship.

For all intents and purposes, fear is a product of the limbic system and specifically, the amygdala. The amygdala is most active when someone experiences fear, anxiety, or aggression, but it's also an important stop for fear-based sensory inputs. Layer 3 (the cortex) processes external stimuli first, (via sight, smell, touch, etc.), before passing it on to other sections of the brain. However, in certain scenarios there's a shortcut, in which the amygdala gets information before the cortex has fully processed things. For example, if a bear charges me while I'm out hiking the amygdala would recognize the extreme danger and send information directly to layer 1, and my body would start preparing to fight or flee. However, we know that fighting or running away from a grizzly is not an ideal response, and to address this, the National Park Service has created a series of PSAs for people who recreate in bear country. If you're attacked by a grizzly, play dead, keep your pack on, spread your legs so the bear can't flip you over, and wait for it to get bored and leave (if the attack continues, then fight back). If you're attacked by a black bear though, fight back or try to escape. If I've seen these, it would be helpful for layer 3 to get involved and remind me that running from a grizzly is not going to end well, but how likely is this during an attack that lasts only a few seconds? Is the PFC going to override that initial amygdala (layer 2 to layer 1) response? Granted, a bear attack is extraordinarily rare and an extreme example, but it illustrates an important point regarding fear responses, in that sometimes

the PFC can mediate, but other times – in certain circumstances – cognitive processes are diminished or eliminated outright. This means that in some cases, fear-based responses are biological. At the same time, not everyone has the same fears or same level of response to the same triggers, so fear is also a learned/cultivated response.

Emphasizing psychology and neurology in American studies is unusual, yet doing so builds upon the work of influential scholars like Edward Said in offering a new understanding on how othering works. For example, in an updated preface to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, Said criticizes the US's second invasion of Iraq in writing, "In the demonization of an unknown enemy, for whom the label 'terrorist' serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post-9/11 period has produced."<sup>35</sup> Said was skewering media entities for their coverage of new (at the time) electronic means of warfare, where there was very little consequence for American soldiers. To Said, this tempered opposition to the Iraq invasion because the only risk was to people who were easily demonized as terrorists. Said was certainly correct in his reading of the cultural landscape, yet his analysis missed why people were easily exploited in times of crisis and insecurity. Yes, the way media reports framed who was in danger contributed to a lackadaisical response to the US's invasion. But it was also a product of the dominant cultural group (white America) being predisposed to build fear associations with people who look and sound very different than them. This is the scientific basis for othering that Said and many others have critiqued throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

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<sup>35</sup> Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xxvi.

Popular culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century framed the Middle East as an acceptable arena for US power. This is one of the core arguments of Melani McAlister's *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, and like my project, she relies on a wide-ranging body of texts to make her point. In beginning with the Biblical epics, like *The 10 Commandments*, of the 1940s and 50s and working her way up to 9/11, McAlister includes myriad texts, many of which would often fall outside the boundaries of traditional academic scholarship.<sup>36</sup> She ends her third chapter, "King Tut, Commodity Nationalism, and the Politics of Oil, 1973-1979" with a five-page analysis of comedian Steve Martin's Saturday Night Live performance, and her following chapter, "Iran, Islam, and the Terrorist Threat, 1979-1989" includes a paragraph devoted to 1980s professional wrestler Iron Sheik. My choice of cultural texts mirrors that of McAlister, in that they often appear unrelated. McAlister's argument is born out of the aggregate, and mine is as well. Chapter four, "The Appearance of Gun Violence," includes analysis of National Rifle Association texts, a major Hollywood film, and a Comedy Central special because in different ways, all three utilize a language of fear to further political goals.

Evelyn Alsultany offers an important analytical guide for interpreting cultural texts in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* by arguing just identifying and classifying certain types of representations misses the point, instead "it is important to

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<sup>36</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

examine the ideological work performed by images and story lines.”<sup>37</sup> I build on this in arguing that in constructing Arab/Muslim characters who are overwhelmingly tied to terrorism, films remind their audience of one of the perils of 21<sup>st</sup> century life: terror. This in turn affects ideological outlooks, best illustrated politically through Donald Trump’s attempt to ban Muslims from entering the country. His ban was based upon a problematic conception of Muslims, but stopping the analysis there (in simply identifying it as a bigoted policy decision) fails to account for the ban’s ideological work: where it comes from, why it’s effective, and what it does. Those three questions – particularly why these discourses are so effective – serve as a unifying component of this study. Fear is the glue that holds cultural discussions together and is what makes these arenas of public thought so influential.

Fear is a defining component of grand narratives that still circulate throughout American society. In Geoff Eley’s *Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* he offers a critique of now-dominant scholarship where historians reduce their focus until they have settled on such a small segment of the population they no longer run the risk of glossing over differences. According to Eley, while scholars no longer perpetuate the grand narratives the cultural turn brought attention to, those same grand narratives still function in daily life. As he argues, “grand narratives can’t be contested by skepticism and incredulity alone, least of all when new or refurbished grand narratives are so powerfully reordering the globe. Grand

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<sup>37</sup> Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 13.

narratives can't be contested by pretending they don't exist."<sup>38</sup> Alsultany doesn't explicitly use the term "grand narrative," herself, but in examining a widely-held yet erroneous belief that Muslim = Arab and Arab = Muslim, she effectively offers a definition of Islamophobia as a grand narrative:

It draws on centuries-old Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings. With this conflation established, it is easy to conceptualize the United States as the inverse of everything that is 'Arab/Muslim': the United States is thus a land of equality and democracy, culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive men and liberated women.<sup>39</sup>

This also allows the US's involvement in the Middle East to be framed in terms of a righteous campaign for freedom and human rights, instead of imperialism based on resource security.

American studies prides itself on interdisciplinary scholarship, but instead of focusing on humanities-adjacent fields like cultural criticism, literary studies, and historical scholarship, we should try to incorporate psychology and neurology into the field. In *On Deep History and the Brain*, historian Daniel Lord Smail argues for the importance of a much longer view when it comes to historical scholarship, and in doing so, he examines the evolutionary context of the human brain through what he calls psychotropic mechanisms.<sup>40</sup> In the simplest sense, these are things that affect the brain. Caffeine, alcohol and tobacco are some of the more common stimuli, but Smail includes others as well: sex, shopping, gambling, religion – really, anything that

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<sup>38</sup> Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 203.

<sup>39</sup> Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

affects the brain could be deemed a psychotropic mechanism. Smail's work should encourage us to investigate avenues of scholarship that aren't often included under the humanities umbrella, and in building off his ideas, I examine how cultural texts, particularly ones imbricated in fear, function as powerful psychotropic mechanisms in 21<sup>st</sup> century American life.

American studies is overtly political in a way other disciplines resist, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it comes about in overt critiques of political administrations, like a 2017 Editor's note in the flagship journal, *American Quarterly*:

even as American studies scholars have long dedicated ourselves to understanding white supremacy, patriarchy, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and neoliberalism, the election results have been a tremendous shock. The values, policies, and behavior represented by Trump, his supporters, and those he is choosing as his staff are deeply in opposition to the fundamental principles of the ASA community.<sup>41</sup>

In other instances, the American Studies Association enters waters most fields avoid, like in 2013 when the ASA passed a resolution calling for a boycott of Israeli universities.<sup>42</sup> In tying domestic issues to a broader transnational landscape, the September 2017 issue of *American Quarterly* begins with a brief essay titled "Collective Statement on Taiwan Independence: Building Global Solidarity and Rejecting US Military Empire." American studies scholars are far from the only group to critique the US military industrial complex, but they go as far to reference

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<sup>41</sup> Mari Yoshihara, "Editor's Note," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2017): p. v-vi, v.

<sup>42</sup> Bill V. Mullen, "Throwing Stones in Glass Houses: The ASA and the Road to Academic Boycott," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (December 2015): pp. 1075-1083.

“the increasingly fascist Trump administration.”<sup>43</sup> There’s an activist tint that circulates throughout American studies that makes it a great choice for conversations involving complicated social issues that are born out of fear.

Despite this activism, American studies scholarship often omits where these problematic topics arise. For instance, in critiquing Trump’s administration, Yoshihara doesn’t examine why he has such populist appeal and why his brand of fear mongering resonates so well with the country. Darda’s article on refugees does a better job of this, but even here, he fails to examine why a US population is so willing to embrace the image of an aggrieved white veteran over that of an actual war refugee. This is what an analysis of fear brings to the table, in that I offer a framework for explaining where these problematic topics arise and guidance on how to address them.

In its current iteration, American studies places a premium on interdisciplinary and transnational scholarship. A prime example of this is Brian T. Edwards’s *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East*, where he examines how US cultural products undergo changes in meaning as they circulate throughout the globe. His ultimate point is that “American culture, long popular globally and assumed to have a positive message or benefit to U.S. politics, is generally taken up by individuals in ways that detach the cultural product from its American referent and thereby shatter the presumption of their close

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<sup>43</sup> Funie Hsu, Brian Hioe, and Wen Liu, “Collective Statement on Taiwan Independence: Building Global Solidarity and Rejecting US Military Empire,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (September 2017): pp. 465-468, 466.

relationship.”<sup>44</sup> In his third chapter, ““Argo Fuck Yourself: Iranian Cinema and the Curious Logics of Circulation,” Edwards includes a brief anecdote that illustrates his overall thesis: an Iranian graduate student in Tehran told him, “Our *Shrek*...isn’t an American film at all.”<sup>45</sup> Thanks to multitudes of pirated copies, many with very different Farci dubbings, *Shrek*, as she knows it, has become an Iranian movie.

An emphasis on transnational scholarship opens the door to thinkers and topics that have historically been ignored or marginalized, and doing so often draws attention to contemporary problems. For instance, in foregrounding how US texts take on entirely different meanings once they arrive in overseas communities, Edwards works against a sense of US superiority that has long viewed American texts as delivering pro-America messages to an eager audience. Instead of just consuming *Shrek*, Iranians twist and alter it until, as his student points out, it ceases being American. Later in this chapter, Edwards engages with the circulations of the 2012 Hollywood film *Argo* and the 2011 Iranian film *A Departure*. In doing so he brings attention to how a US audience views any film originating in Iran as being little more than a piece of state-sponsored propaganda. While this holds a kernel of truth, Edwards points out many Iranian filmmakers are quite capable of subverting the state-sponsored line, along with the fact that US cinema itself is beholden to a number of de facto regulations. These revelations are products of a transnational approach, but in a simpler sense, this type of scholarship also draws attention to Iranian

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<sup>44</sup> Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century - the Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Edwards, 118.

filmmakers and critics. We don't encounter interviews with Ben Affleck or other US filmmakers in Edwards's work. Instead, we hear from Iranian figures.

*After the American Century* embodies the type of transnational scholarship found throughout American studies, yet I worry an emphasis on the transnational has the potential to let concerning things in the US slip by. In talking about the flat characterization of *Argo*'s Iranian characters, Edwards writes, "By rewriting the Iranian individual as an anonymous, mostly violent enemy of the United States, *Argo* unwittingly underwrote the continued sanctions against the Iranian state, which have had the gravest consequences on middle- and lower-class Iranians."

<sup>46</sup> In chapter two I build off this point in arguing a similar type of characterization in Hollywood films contributes to Islamophobia, but what Edwards misses here, and throughout his book, is why certain tropes gain political and social traction in the US. I don't engage with the types of transnational scholarship that's associated with today's iteration of American studies, but it's not because I don't value it. It's just that I view the fears circulating throughout mainstream US culture as pressing in their own right. Furthermore, my hope is that in emphasizing a new way to think about fear, I can open the door for transnational scholars to inject fear into their own analyses.

### Whose Fear Matters?

The cultural anxiety 21<sup>st</sup> century America faces serves as a reckoning where long-powerful groups now face their inability to resolve threats. I analyze a variety of texts that all skew white, male, middle class, and heteronormative, which runs counter to an American studies

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<sup>46</sup> Edwards, 92.

prerogative to emphasize the work, successes, and struggles of subaltern peoples. While it's possible to view this as a flaw in my methodology, I think it better illustrates just how pernicious and ingrained white hegemony still is in the country. The fear discourses (technology, Muslims, and guns) are everywhere and claim to illustrate the danger the country faces, yet they feature individuals and narrative arcs specific to the fears of only a segment of the country.

Fear often is presented in connection with an assault on American values, but this glosses over the fact the descriptor American is itself a contentious term. Historically, when people used phrases like American culture, American values, or American experience, most were talking about the experiences of only a small slice of the country. The narrative of America's westward expansion, embodied in Fredrick Jackson Turner's 1893 "Frontier Thesis," erased indigenous peoples in their entirety in focusing solely on the white male settlers who moved across the continent. Their story was thought to encapsulate an American essence, yet it focused on only a small segment of the country. The cultural turn sought to end this and brought about a profound shift in terms of who and what was included under the umbrella of American. American studies places the utmost importance on examining the ways different peoples experience life, yet the underside has been that grand narratives go unchecked because they present a host of methodological problems.

For example, in the next chapter I examine how concerns over digital technology infect US cultural discussions about democracy and education. These fears permeate throughout a variety of realms and texts, so when I make comments about how a fear of technology is predicated on a populist-tinted conception of society being great prior to smartphones, I'm not arguing every single person is guilty of this. Indeed, there are many who have nuanced views of

how technology intersects with other cultural arenas. Still though, many discussions surrounding this recent evolution do begin from a starting point where new = bad. Just, well, because. It's hard to address this without making some sweeping statements about the country's population.

Analyzing fear ends up being similar to an earlier era of scholarship, in which white, male, heterosexual, middle class sensibilities served as a stand-in for the entire country. In talking about American fear, it becomes apparent quite quickly the fears of certain people reign supreme. For instance, the Islamophobic narratives that gained traction after 9/11 would often ask (or demand) historically marginalized groups, ones beginning to gain political traction, to prioritize America's War on Terror in place of their own struggles. The US's most popular sport, the NFL, has faced controversy following Collin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem in protest of police violence in black communities. The discussion quickly turned from Kaepernick's goal to virulent attacks of his (and his supporter's) lack of patriotism. This rhetorical shift relies on an established grand narrative that sees the US, representing everything good in the world, locked in battle with Islam, representing everything bad. Given the dire nature of this conflict, being a "good" American requires those who are concerned about internal US problems to give them up in the face of, ostensibly, a much larger and ominous national threat. In the end, while the US has made strides in the democratization of public voices, the way fear often uses a language of American \_\_\_\_\_ being under attack belies a political and social structure in which the fears and concerns of some vastly outweigh the fears and concerns of Others.

Fear is an integral component in the US's most sanctified grand narrative: progress in the face of adversity. Turner's idea of westward expansion defined the country for decades because

it claimed to offer insight into an American essence. It's not that Turner's argument included explicit references to fear, but the underlying message was that intrepid, singularly great representatives of the country were able to overcome unimaginable odds and difficulties. The roots of this go back even further though, in that prior to leaving England in 1630, John Winthrop delivered a motivational sermon where he proclaimed his band of Puritan emigrants would become a "city on a hill" for the rest of the world to see. The eventual founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were going to tame the untamable. In American mythology, these were fearless proto-Americans tackling a vast ocean and an unknown continent. This same mentality (taming the wilds) would later factor into colonial expansion and the founding of the USA itself. While the Turnerian sense of the frontier has disappeared, the US spent the 20<sup>th</sup> century recreating this paradigm throughout the world, fighting in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War. At the close of those conflicts, the country then mythologized them as evidence of a continued history of American greatness. Today, the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been replaced by the US's continued involvement in the Middle East, as a character makes clear in Clint Eastwood's 2014 *American Sniper* by saying "Welcome to Fallujah. The new wild west of the old Middle East."<sup>47</sup>

The US's grand narrative is replete with fear, but it's been framed as instances of the country overcoming those fears, yet that framework is breaking down and contributing to the proliferation of the fear discourses I examine. The US's cultural mindset is one of overcoming, yet today we seem unable to conquer the most ubiquitous fear narratives, despite being

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<sup>47</sup> *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Brothers, 2015).

continually reminded of the danger we face. Despite concerted efforts to squash terrorism, attacks still happen. Completely unplugging from technology isn't a realistic option. And with hundreds of millions of guns circulating in the US, is there any possible way to eliminate gun violence? A driving component of *Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is that there doesn't seem to be much the country can do to overcome these fears. The definitive grand narrative about the US is faltering.

### Fear Theory

Fear is messy and full of paradoxes. It's both a learned and innate process. It's everywhere, yet frequently escapes notice. Despite being nondescript, it has very real physiological affects regardless of if the fear is based on a valid assessment of threat. And once fear associations have been cultivated and strengthened, it takes more than correct information for those fears to disappear. What makes this even worse is that the origin of bigotry is often fear. When Mari Yoshihara wrote that 2017 Editor's Note in *American Quarterly*, she referenced a handful of things (white supremacy, patriarchy, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and neoliberalism) that, in varying ways, can be tied to fear. Those fears are real, which makes addressing how they manifest themselves in society challenging.

It's accurate to say those fears are real, but that notion gets complicated once those fears manifest themselves in bigoted politics and policy. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, President Donald Trump tapped into the US's legacy of anti-black racism in tweeting: "I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood. Your housing prices will go up based on the market, and crime will go down. I have rescinded the Obama-Biden AFFH Rule.

Enjoy!”<sup>48</sup> In writing for the New York Times, Annie Karni, Maggie Haberman, and Sydney Ember explain how these Tweets “painted a false picture of the suburbs as under siege and ravaged by crime, using fear-mongering language that has become something of a rhetorical flourish in his general election campaign.”<sup>49</sup> They go on to note this wasn’t an isolated instance, referencing an earlier Trump Tweet that read, “The Suburban Housewives of America must read this article. Biden will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it, and make it even better!” This (thinly veiled) racist dog whistle harkens back to a well-established fear circulating throughout white America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that contributed to white flight and redlining. I’m not interested in examining Donald Trump’s Twitter habits in great detail or commenting on the extent this fear still circulates in the US. What this example illustrates though is that acknowledging someone’s fear becomes difficult when that fear is tied to things like housing discrimination that have had (and continue to have) massive impacts on the lived experiences of millions of people. From the physiological sense, a fear that immigrants or minorities will ruin a neighborhood can be completely “valid,” in that it really does make people feel scared and/or stressed. Despite recognizing this, we can’t just shrug our shoulders and walk away. We need to look at how we can change and eliminate these fears.

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<sup>48</sup> Brendan Brown, “Trump Twitter Archive,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?dates=%5B%222020-07-08%22%2C%222020-07-30%22%5D&results=1&retweet=%22false%22>.

<sup>49</sup> Annie Karni, Maggie Haberman, and Sydney Ember, “Trump Plays on Racist Fears of Terrorized Suburbs to Court White Voters,” The New York Times (The New York Times, July 29, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/us/politics/trump-suburbs-housing-white-voters.html>.

To address this issue, we need to examine how cultural representations create and further fear associations that then turn into bigoted politics. In *Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, and the Moral Panic Over the City*, Steve Macek examines the moral panic surrounding cities that circulated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ultimately arguing his analysis “explores the role played by the mass media – from the news to Hollywood films to advertising – in inflating the perceived menace of the postindustrial metropolis and legitimating the right’s ‘law-and-order’ remedies for the nation’s urban ills.”<sup>50</sup> This is the type of fear Trump was tapping into with his tweets: suburbanites need fear the type of danger and depravity lurking in cities and that is trying to make its way to their doorstep. In “The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia,” Macek focuses on a genre of film dubbed “yuppie horror,” and in summarizing 1993’s *Judgment Night*, he offers a definition of this genre:

premised on a crudely drawn binary opposition between the safe comforts of suburbia and the mortal dangers of the inner city, it tells the story of a group of suburban men driving to a boxing match who take a wrong turn into a ‘bad neighborhood’ on Chicago’s South Side, witness a murder, and spend the rest of the film running from the drug dealers who are responsible for the killing.<sup>51</sup>

He ends with an extended reading of *Seven*, noting how the dark and dreary landscape of the city reinforces an overall logic of urban areas being dangerous. In writing this type of film “reflects the terrified perspective of people who over the past few decades have done their utmost to ‘get far away from’ the city and the collective responsibilities and human solidarities upon which the

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<sup>50</sup> Steve Macek, *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City* (Minneapolis, Ma: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii.

<sup>51</sup> Macek, 213.

city is based,”<sup>52</sup> he lays out how media representations (and the fear they cultivate) factor into the lives of American citizens.

Based on psychological and neurological understandings of fear, removing a constant source of threat, in the form fear-based cultural texts, would assist in changing how people feel. In the case of Trump’s suburbia comments, seeing that type of language would trigger the types of racialized fears Macek examines. If those types of texts were eliminated from society, people wouldn’t have their fears triggered, yet as soon as someone did say those things or produce a movie like that, the fears would be right there. People need to actively learn something isn’t scary. It’s not enough to just remove the fear trigger. Pointing out how certain types of fear circulate in US culture (like Macek’s work does) is a necessary step in eliminating fear, but we know it’s not as simple as this. Paula Ioanide argues you need to address affective economies before you present new information, lest people ignore that information because it conflicts with how they already feel. Her argument gets at the messy nature of fear in that you need to change how people feel before you can change how people think, which gets at what psychologists refer to as “active learning.”

It’s not enough to be told something isn’t dangerous; people need to experience triggers being non-threatening. In *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity*, Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods broach the tricky topic of “educating the intolerance out of people,” in noting that one of the few things that has proven

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<sup>52</sup> Macek, 255.

to consistently reduce intolerance has been “beneficial contact.”<sup>53</sup> They recount studies that have examined desegregated military units from WWII and found that white soldiers who fought alongside black soldiers had “more positive attitudes toward black people than white soldiers who did not” and that “pairs of freshman roommates at UCLA who were of different races reported more comfort in mixed-race interactions and more tolerance toward mixed-race dating.”<sup>54</sup> They go on to note simple stories can help lessen intolerance as well, writing “though hardly a new or cutting-edge approach, storytelling is a proven method of improving our ability to empathize with people who seem like outsiders.”<sup>55</sup> This tells us that one of the important components of fear extinction is making sure the fearful have contact with their triggers. As educators, this tells us we should be very careful about the texts we select for our classes, and that we should emphasize how fear narratives circulate throughout culture and that our chosen texts are there to disrupt those fear associations.

The dominance of fear in myriad societal conversations makes extinction unlikely to happen by itself thanks to what chronic stress does to people. Fear extinction requires people actively learn something isn’t scary, but stress can affect the process: “Stress also makes it harder to *unlearn* fear, to ‘extinguish’ a conditioned fear association.”<sup>56</sup> Stressful events and situations appear to limit the PFC’s (the cognition center of the brain) ability to regulate the amygdala’s

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<sup>53</sup> Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity* (New York: Random House, 2020).

<sup>54</sup> Hare and Woods, 168.

<sup>55</sup> Hare and Woods, 169.

<sup>56</sup> Sapolsky, *Behave*, 129.

(automatic response center) response to aversive stimuli. In thinking about a person seeing a scary image, added stress limits the power of the PFC and the amygdala dominates. In “The Influence of Acute Stress on the Regulation of Conditioned Fear,” Candace Raio and Elizabeth Phelps note “increased prefrontal activity is often coupled with decreased activity in the amygdala during the reappraisal of aversive or threatening stimuli.”<sup>57</sup> Certain cognitive strategies are helpful in reducing the automatic responses fear stimuli produces (this is the basis for counting to ten when you’re angry). Raio and Phelps continue in saying, “emerging work across species suggests that these processes [cognitive emotion regulation] – and the prefrontal brain regions on which they depend – are highly sensitive to the detrimental effects of acute stress.”<sup>58</sup> They’re talking about a clinical setting and acute stressors, but the overall idea is important for understanding how the brain processes fear: cognitive abilities to modulate automatic responses are weakened when someone is subjected to stress.

Fear discourses magnify the anxiety and stress people experience in focusing on their limited control over a variety of precarious situations. The country is in danger, yet helpless. Smartphones and social media are destroying society and ruining human relationships and interactions, yet there’s no way to live without them. In the case of Islamophobia, texts emphasize the difficulty in determining the identity of terrorists until after the fact, with the implication being that if the military and intelligence branches of the US government can’t stop terror, regular people have little hope for safety. There are hundreds of millions of guns

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<sup>57</sup> Candace M. Raio and Elizabeth A. Phelps, “The Influence of Acute Stress on the Regulation of Conditioned Fear,” *Neurobiology of Stress* 1 (2015): pp. 134-146, 139.

<sup>58</sup> Raio and Phelps, 140.

circulating throughout the US, so it will always be relatively easy to obtain one. And what on earth are we to do with the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot and the fact that a political party that gets tens of millions of votes each year doesn't seem to care? Collectively, these (and other) discourses remind the American populace it should always be afraid.

Addressing these discourses requires an identification of how a text generates fear because doing so alerts us to the fact our cognition might be impaired. In focusing on fear triggers, my analysis contains two broad categories, though there is often a degree of overlap, and these categories are by no means definitive. The first, characteristic of Islamophobia, involves fears of people and plays to a wired us-vs-them component of the human brain. Neuroscience tells us humans build fear associations more readily with those who look different, and thus Muslims are easy targets for fear-based rhetoric because – when it comes to stereotypes – they look markedly different from “real” Americans. The second category focuses on non-human objects that are products of well-established fear narratives. A fear of technology involves common apocalyptic tropes where society is locked in battle with some type of antagonistic technological manifestation. It's not that people are biologically inclined to fear smart phones, it's that they've encountered the technology-is-dangerous trope so frequently, fear goes unacknowledged and affects other technology-adjacent topics. A variety of psychology and neurology scholarship indicates our brains don't process information as well when we're afraid, so being cognizant of when texts utilize fear tropes can help us overcome how those texts are affecting judgment.

The next step in dismantling regimes of fear is to utilize psychological and neurological evidence to weaken fear associations and lessen the power they wield throughout society.

Specifically, we can reappraise texts for the ways those representations circulate and champion texts that offer non-fear-based representations. For example, if you encounter a text that seems weighted in fear and involves people who do not look or sound like you, you should question how you feel, understanding the complicated interactions of top-down and bottom-up influencing. The tension in *American Sniper* is a product of Eastwood's skill as a filmmaker, but it's also a product of white America being predisposed to fear the film's antagonist group. We can also reference texts that feature Others as divorced from their cultural stereotypes. For example, Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* includes the types of nuanced and complicated representations of inner-city African Americans that the texts of Macek's scholarship lack. These types of texts disrupt the established fear associations found throughout American life.

Societal conversations involving topics imbricated with fear see little nuanced, thoughtful debate, as the part of the brain responsible for those works less when people are scared and stressed. Paula Ioanide ends *The Emotional Politics of Racism* by chronicling the frustrating experiences she had as part of a community group, Coalition to Stop the Tompkins County Jail Expansion, that was trying to stop the addition of cells to a county jail in upstate New York. Despite coming armed with facts about how this was a poor use of taxpayer funds, the group found little success in legislative settings: "we were battling emotionally entrenched structures that held intact ideologies, beliefs, and worldviews, not empirical evidence."<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, instead of directing their appeals to the local legislators responsible for deciding on the jail expansion, Ioanide realized "that when the court of public opinion changes to support justice,

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<sup>59</sup> Ioanide, *Emotional Politics of Racism*, 213.

legislators and laws will have no choice but to offer concessions.”<sup>60</sup> Their coalition then decided to target the local community in discussing and testifying to the racist beliefs that construct and further mass incarceration in the US. That was a more fruitful endeavor, in that the success they found in those community settings sustained the group even though they failed in stopping the prison expansion (though they were able to get three of the fourteen members to change their votes). The frustration Ioanide and her group encountered is a product of well-entrenched fear narratives found throughout the types of cultural texts Steve Macek analyzed and illustrates how cultural fears manifest themselves in racist policies. In effect, Ioanide and her coalition were butting up against a phenomenon Berreby noted in writing, “Like a country road that widens over the years into a superhighway, the path to a strong and frequent emotion gets easier to take; conversely, the way to a seldom-felt emotion gets slow and difficult, like a potholed street no one drives down.”<sup>61</sup> Once a fear has become ingrained, it takes more than facts to override the amygdala and those well-travelled neural paths. By analyzing fear, my intent is to introduce new tools that can assist in dismantling the beliefs that undergird systemic bigotry in the US.

Chapter 1, “The Technological Apocalypse: Evolving Towards Disaster,” centers on the idea our society is slowly shifting away from a human-oriented way of life to a more problematic, digital existence. Defined by real/digital and then/now binaries, documentaries like Netflix’s *The Social Dilemma* stoke fear by focusing on how pre-internet life was somehow more authentic (real) than what we have today. Myriad entertainment narratives reflect this as well, ranging from television shows like CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory*, in which characters are the

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<sup>60</sup> Ioanide, 215.

<sup>61</sup> Berreby, *Us & Them*, 258.

subject of light-hearted ridicule because their penchant for digital spaces make them unappealing romantic partners, to Hollywood franchises like *The Terminator*, where society creates an Artificial Intelligence platform that ultimately turns on its creator. While no one can see the future, enough cultural narratives present the future as a dangerous, or at the very least inferior, place due to technology, that society should be afraid about where we're headed. This fear then frames societal issues as a product of a vitriolic social media age, with the end result being incredibly complex cultural arenas are reduced to simple cause-and-effect explanations. While a fear of technology furthers the power of other fear discourses simply by adding a source of chronic stress, I begin with this chapter to help guard against an undue emphasis on social media causing the vitriol that surrounds the War on Terror and gun violence discourses.

Chapter 2, "Overtly Hidden Terror," examines how entertainment and political narratives construct Muslim identities around a notion that anyone who looks like a Muslim/Arab could be a terrorist. A recent genre of film, the "based on a true story" (BOTS) narrative, embodied by movies like *American Sniper*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* all foreground the difficulty (and often failure) of the US intelligence and military apparatuses to keep Americans safe. Even the experts can't identify who the dangerous entities are, so the US, as a country, is in a very perilous state. This fear narrative is born out of human biology, in that white America (the dominant political and social group) is predisposed to build fear associations faster with the stereotypical conception of a Muslim/Arab other. A variety of media, then, both perpetuates and strengthens this fear discourse, and the concerning growth of white, far-right domestic terrorism goes unaddressed because the dangerous entities look like the people in power. To combat Islamophobia, we need texts like Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir

*Persepolis*, to reframe Muslims as nuanced peoples, complete with complications and contradictions. Texts like this generate the type of active learning necessary for fear extinction.

Chapter 3, “The Appearance of Gun Violence” examines how fear circulates throughout American gun discourse. The Weapons Priming Effect is a psychological principle that finds people are more aggressive in the presence of weapons, which helps explain why gun discourse is such a polemical issue in America. Two types of fear triggers define gun discourse: Stranger Danger (SD) and Wrong People (WP), both of which frame danger around particular types of individuals. 2008’s *The Brave One* illustrates SD fear, in showcasing New York City as a crime-infested wasteland where the only way to protect oneself from random acts of violence is to carry a gun. This is mirrored in a 21<sup>st</sup> century trend that has seen firearms manufacturers market their products as protective tools, as opposed to sporting goods. WP fear, found in documentaries like 2002’s *Bowling for Columbine* and 2018’s *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns* foreground the availability of guns, but also constructs gun owners as extremists (identified by militia paraphernalia). The country is in danger from the wrong people getting ahold of guns, and conceivably carrying out acts of terrorism. In the political realm, both SD and WP narratives reduce the complicated topic of why people hurt others with guns into simplistic for and against arguments about background checks. This chapter also serves as a test case for self-examination. I am wary of putting forth a theory that frames fear as something characteristic of “those people,” e.g., people who subscribe to a conservative political and/or cultural outlook that differs from mine. I believe gun violence in the US is a realm where fear could be used for good (scaring families to lock their guns up to keep young children from finding and playing with them), but I am not immune from the ways fear could be affecting my thoughts. If a world

replete with fear narratives surrounding technology and Muslims is having deleterious effects on society, how am I to know the various types of fear logics circulating throughout gun discourse aren't having the same impact on me?

I conclude with an analysis of the January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 riots in Washington DC to illustrate how that day was a result of a country steeped in fear. It wasn't just a riot built upon Donald Trump's lies surrounding the 2020 US Presidential Election. It was a riot replete with fear narratives of all kinds, both on behalf of the perpetrators and those who covered the events. American Islamophobia is the best discourse to highlight how science and humanities can work together, and January 6<sup>th</sup> is the best vehicle to showcase the power of fear in the aggregate. It illustrates how we need to treat all fear discourses in order to prevent things like this from happening in the future.

A variety of fear discourses work together to create societal stress, and the cumulative effect then makes it difficult to unlearn any specific type of fear. Chapter 3, "Overtly Hidden Terror," examines how a plethora of cultural texts emphasizes the danger Islam poses to American bodies. It's the perfect fear discourse to combine the type of psychological and neurological scholarship I've laid out with established humanities work, but it's bookended by two very different fear analyses. Chapter 2 looks at technology, and chapter 4 examines how fear circulates in gun discourse. Neither feature the same type of prepared learning (white America being predisposed to build fear associations with those who look and sound different) that Islamophobia does. This is to draw attention to how fears that don't seem all that important augment fears that are. If you want to stop the types of bigotry circulating throughout the US (what Yoshihara was getting at in her editor's note), you can't limit yourself to examining just

that form of fear. We need to thoroughly examine all fear texts because, combined, they contribute to societal stress that plays out in very real, very problematic ways.

## TECHNOLOGICAL APOCALYPSE: AN UNFOLDING AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Williams worried that placing technology at the center of our intellectual analysis is bound to make us view what we have traditionally understood as a problem of politics, with its complex and uneasy questions of ethics and morality, as instead a problem of technology, either eliminating or obfuscating all the unresolved philosophical dilemmas.<sup>62</sup>

Almost fifty years ago, Raymond Williams examined a 1970s obsession with television, but this was far from a unique concern: people have always looked to a new form of media as an indicator of social decline. Writing on the explosion of novel consumption in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, historian Daniel Smail notes, “observers described this mania as a disease or epidemic, associating it with physical exhaustion, the rejection of reality, and bodily immobility.”<sup>63</sup> The similarities between an apparent rejection of the real in favor of a sedentary, indoor life should be striking to anyone who has read (likely on a tablet or iPhone) an article condemning smartphones or social media. But even Smail’s 18<sup>th</sup> century anti-reading zealots were not original in their complaints. Socrates, the famed scholar and foundational figure of Western thought, complained about the alphabet, as media theorist Nancy Baym points out in quoting his lament: “this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls...they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing.”<sup>64</sup> Fear might not be the first term we

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<sup>62</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 292.

<sup>63</sup> Smail, *On Deep History*, 181.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy K. Baym, “Making New Media Make Sense,” in *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), pp. 24-56, 28.

think of in describing these complaints, but they fit into a larger cultural narrative that views new forms of media technology as dangerous to current ways of life.

Today, a series of polemical conversations surrounding smartphones and social media focuses on how these new platforms and devices undermine and endanger American life. This fear of digital technology sees the American body in danger because society is foregoing “authentic” human relationships in favor of digital spaces. It’s not even that cultural values are under attack, it’s human values that are in danger of disappearing, some of which have already vanished. Furthermore, reminiscent of Williams’s concern, discourse centered on digital spaces creates an easy cause-and-effect relationship instead of examining the messy components of 21<sup>st</sup> century American life. For example, analysis that focuses on fake news circulation places the blame at the feet of digital spaces and how those platforms allow the spread of misinformation instead of addressing the messy topic of why people believe those stories in the first place. As a whole, this fear discourse generates the notion digital spaces, in addition to undermining human values, are causing these problems in American society. While not as overtly grounded in fear as topics like terrorism, the fear discourse that surrounds new forms of digital media participates in the same game in reminding the country its way of life is under attack.

Questions of authenticity inform a genre of current American studies scholarship in examining how settler colonialism erases contemporary ideas of indigenous identity in favor of a romantic view of what indigenous peoples were like in the past. Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman lends voice to this in “Beyond the Coloniality of Authenticity,” writing that, as a native Hawaiian, upon entering the university system she was struck by how a white academy viewed her as inauthentic:

The gap between our contemporary modernity and the vanished culture we studied condemned us to lessons about our lived inauthenticity. I sat in those classrooms processing repeatedly that, by the metrics of my professors and their colleagues, I was not an authentic Hawaiian, and neither were my parents.<sup>65</sup>

Stillman argues for a complete elimination of authenticity from indigenous identity altogether because regardless of how these discussions take place, ultimately “the end result will always be affirmations of inclusion, or exclusion by means of identity violence. Authenticity operates as a binary – either on *is*, or one *is not*.”<sup>66</sup> For Stillman, authenticity assists in hiding the legacy and brutality of colonialism, along with masking the ongoing settler colonial project. In her analysis, Stillman picks up on one of the characteristics of the word “authenticity,” in that it generates a binary framework. After all, something can’t be almost authentic. It either is or is not. The same principle holds true for current discussions regarding digital spaces and American lives. Here, society embraces texts that lament the loss of authentically lived lives (due to a proliferation of smart phones and accompanying social media) instead of seriously examining the unflattering components of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

This fear discourse centers on the idea our society is slowly shifting away from a human-oriented way of life to a more problematic, digital existence. Defined by real/digital and then/now binaries, documentaries like Netflix’s *The Social Dilemma* stoke fear by focusing on how pre-internet life was somehow more authentic (real) than what we have today. Myriad entertainment narratives reflect this as well, ranging from television shows like CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory*, in which characters are the subject of light-hearted ridicule because their penchant

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<sup>65</sup> Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, “Beyond the Coloniality of Authenticity,” *American Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2021): pp. 161-167, 162.

<sup>66</sup> Stillman, 164.

for digital spaces make them unappealing romantic partners, to Hollywood franchises like *The Terminator*, where society creates an Artificial Intelligence (AI) platform that ultimately turns on its creator. Society is in a teleology when it comes to this gradual disappearance of the real/digital binary, and while no one can see the future, enough cultural narratives present the future as a treacherous place that society should be afraid about where it's headed. Furthermore, thanks to the ubiquity of things like smartphones and social media, there doesn't seem to be anything people can do to overcome this danger. Technophobia has produced a society where concerning topics seem insurmountable, as they've been (ostensibly) created by platforms like Twitter, and these platforms are here to stay. This feeds the overall fear narrative in that the country is in grave danger, but there's nothing people can do to stop it.

### The End of The Real/Digital Divide

There are two binaries that shape a fear of digital spaces. The first is a distinction between real (good) and digital (bad), and the second is a clear demarcation between then (when things were good) and now (when things are bad). Most often this takes the form of "real," being used as a synonym for in-person interactions, which then defines digitally-mediated platforms as something other than real (as if a conversation I had via text or Twitter is somehow less real than if I had that exchange in person). The second binary is a hallmark of populist thinking in which then takes on a rosy tint because now has a number of complicated problems. The reality is that the same types of problems existed ten, twenty, or fifty years ago, but they disappear in this backwards-looking view. Thus, something new, digital media platforms in this case, comes to serve as a scapegoat for the day's concerns.

The real/digital binary is further complicated by the fact the distinction itself is growing harder and harder to make. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner argue that “online and offline experiences are in fact so fundamentally intertwined that it’s impossible to parse where the embodied ends and the digital begins; the one sustains and contextualizes the other.”<sup>67</sup> They go on to write that, should you set out to place all the day’s activities in either the “offline” or “online” or category, you would quickly run into a morass of classificatory problems. While the Covid-19 pandemic drastically altered how people conducted their lives, with many shifting to a digitally-mediated work environment, it wasn’t an entirely new trend. Prior to the pandemic, news broke on Twitter before it made its way into newspapers and magazines, and the first Twitter President, Donald Trump, made the social media platform a dominant talking point throughout his presidency. Trying to decide what should be labeled “online” or “offline” is a hopeless endeavor, yet despite the real/digital binary gradually losing importance, society is ramping up its obsession with its obsolescence.

This concern comes about because the process is seen as a shift towards a more troubling, digitally-dominated existence. It’s not that the two are fusing, but that the digital is growing to take over the real. Writing for *The Next Web*, Simon Kemp’s “Digital Trends 2019: Every single stat you need to know about the internet” reports the average American spent six hours and thirty minutes a day on the internet.<sup>68</sup> This is an alarming statistic, if you subscribe to a faulty

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<sup>67</sup> Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 66-67.

<sup>68</sup> Simon Kemp, “Digital Trends 2019: Every Single Stat You Need to Know about the Internet,” TNW | Contributors, March 4, 2019, <https://thenextweb.com/news/digital-trends-2019->

real/digital binary that assumes the country is spending this time involved in trivial endeavors instead of “real” activities. According to anthropologist Tom Boelstorff, murky definitions of what counts as digital compounds this fear because it generates a sense of false authenticity: “technological distinctions are central to the human condition: artifice, the act of crafting, is a quintessentially human endeavor. To presume otherwise sets the stage for the ‘principle of false authenticity.’”<sup>69</sup> Boelstorff’s larger point is that there has never been a time when humans didn’t use technology to mediate their lives in some way, so to decry current society as inauthentic because a new form is in vogue is intellectually suspect.

A growing awareness that our lives are fundamentally tied to a digital world isn’t any sort of revelation itself, but with the specter of false authenticity looming large, and buoyed by seemingly alarming data like Kemp’s, this awareness takes on a negative connotation. We led more authentic – real – lives in a pre-internet world, and now we are trending towards some sort of inferior existence. Another article for *The Next Web*, by Mathew Hughes, illustrates this with its title: “Study shows we’re spending an insane amount of time online.” Hughes writes that the global average of 6+ hours “sounds like a lot, but it’s absolutely astronomical when spread across an entire year. It equates to more than 100 days of online time every year for every

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every-single-stat-you-need-to-know-about-the-internet.

<sup>69</sup> Tom Boellstorff, “Rethinking Digital Anthropology,” in *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 41.

internet user.”<sup>70</sup> But again, this is astronomical only if you rely on that flawed binary where people are either spending time online or doing “real” things.

Human lives being tied to digital spaces instills fear about the future, given the teleological nature of this fear discourse. Boelstorff’s comments are helpful once more, as he explains how the boundary blurring of the real and digital contributes to eschatological narratives:

Thus, the more significant danger lies not in scholarly misrepresentation but in the three-part narrative of movement embedded in these concerns over authenticity, dichotomies, and blurring: an originary separation, a coming together and a reunification. This narrative is a teleology insofar as there is a defining endpoint: the impending nonseparation of the virtual and the actual, often presented in the apocalyptic language of ‘the end of the virtual/real divide.’”<sup>71</sup>

Once that boundary finally disappears, all the bad from the online world will fill our lives, and our society will, if not outright crumble, at least devolve into something where what it means to be human has been substantially cheapened. In forsaking meaningful authentic activities of the



Figure 1. A screenshot from *Wall-E* illustrates what awaits humankind should they completely embrace technology.

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew Hughes, “Study Shows We’re Spending an Insane Amount of Time Online,” TNW | Tech, January 31, 2019, <https://thenextweb.com/news/study-shows-were-spending-an-insane-amount-of-time-online>.

<sup>71</sup> Boellstorff, “Rethinking Digital Anthropology,” 41.

real world (and the past) in place of inferior and dangerous digital lives, the possibility of returning to an idyllic past disappears. Instead, humanity will be faced with a new reality, one decidedly worse simply because it's gone full-digital. This is the trope featured in films like Pixar's 2008 *Wall-E* where humanity has grown obese and useless, happy to sit ensconced in VR-like settings, their lives ruined by the irresistible virtual world. Devoid of any "real" human content, the lives of these future civilizations serve as a warning about society's current infatuation with smartphones. In a more violent context, franchises like *The Matrix* and *Terminator* feature societies fighting through technological apocalypses brought about by a total emergence in digital worlds. These films include the most overt representations of what happens when societies lose control of their machines, but this fear can be more subtle. For example, a standard in crafting a stereotypical loser sees a male character immersed in online worlds, which is then linked to sexual inexperience and/or inadequacy. This was featured in 2005's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and was one of the core principles of *The Big Bang Theory*.

A teleology is based on evolution, and myriad contemporary texts remind people how much society has evolved technologically, and by extension, how close it is to that dangerous future. Society might be a ways away from antagonistic AI platforms, but now there are all sorts of "smart" devices, which is a long ways from where it was just twenty years ago. This serves as the basis for comedian Tim Wilson's song "Jetpack," which details his disappointment in that children of his era (60s and 70s) were promised all sorts of amazing technological marvels like

flying cars, but now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there's nothing close to that.<sup>72</sup> The repeated chorus, "Where the f\*ck is my jetpack?" drives his lament home, and while Wilson's song is certainly in jest, it carries a kernel of truth. We might not ever have flying cars, but AI-driven cars exist. Society is progressing away from certain ways of life and towards others. At the same time, there are widely held societal beliefs that imagine the terminal point of this evolution as dangerous. Texts like Wilson's song, CBS's show, and the Wachowskis' franchise all do the same work, in reminding people a very prevalent component of their lives is a step towards a dangerous future.

This logic is found in a variety of narratives, which both reinforces and creates the idea a world immersed in digital spaces is dangerous. Academic articles like Holly Shakya and Nicholas A. Christakis's "Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study" from the *American Journal of Epidemiology* and Jean Twenge's "Decreases in Psychological Well-Being among American Adolescents after 2012 and Links to Screen Time during the Rise of Smartphone Technology" from the journal *Emotion* lend a degree of scientific and academic credibility to these concerns. *The Social Dilemma* features one type of expert testimony in that those who created these platforms make frequent appearances, but scholarly studies lend another type: the brightest and most educated think we're on a dangerous path. These academic endeavors fall victim to the real/digital binary though, in that they fail to account for how this fear discourse generates the idea that spending time in digital spaces is bad. This

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<sup>72</sup> Tim Wilson, "Jetpack," 2009.

creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that so many studies, news stories, TV shows, and films tell people there's something wrong with interactions that play out via a digital platform.

Binary thinking works its magic here because instead of being part of life, clear demarcations frame digital behavior as a problematic appendage, threatening normal life. Paradoxically, digital platforms are then both ubiquitous and aberrant. Ubiquitous because people spend a quarter of their day on the internet, an “insane” amount because that behavior is separate from real activity. Aberrant because people didn't engage in these behaviors in the past, so since this is an additive component and clearly separate from what is ideal, this new behavior could be excised. However, thanks to its prevalence, it would take a gargantuan effort to do this. Furthermore, while all sorts of texts generate fear by focusing on the manifestation of technology (be it a smartphone, digital platform, etc.), few, if any, offer any concrete solutions. What the country is left with is a massive fear discourse that repeatedly reminds people their way of life is in danger and that there is nothing they can do about it.

### Something Is Rotten in the US...and it's Twitter

A 2020 Netflix documentary embodies this fear discourse in portraying the country in a perilous present, careening towards a dangerous future. *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski, premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival and runs for just over ninety minutes.<sup>73</sup> Built around cut-up interviews with reformed tech insiders and prominent critics of social media, Orlowski presents their testimony so that his audience walks away terrified. His expert witnesses held titles like Vice President of Engineering and Director of Monetization at places like Google,

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<sup>73</sup> *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (2020; Netflix), Online.

Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, and all left due to ethical concerns involving their companies' business plans. Yet instead of a documentary that examines the role of social media (and their business practices) in 21<sup>st</sup> century lives, Orłowski produces a documentary about why people should be terrified of smartphone technology.

To elicit powerful emotional responses, Orłowski intersperses a short fictional narrative throughout the film that focuses on a family torn apart by social media. The documentary itself follows a straightforward progression where subjects talk about things like social media addiction and fake news circulation. The fictional narrative will then feature members of the middle-class family encountering those same concerns. For example, after the initial experts are introduced and briefly mention the dangers of social media, the family's story begins with a contentious dinner where everyone is on their phones. As the documentary progresses, the story largely focuses on the teenage son, Ben, who initially believes a concern over phone usage is a waste of time. However, he becomes addicted to a news feed heavy in radicalizing political content, quits his soccer team and "chooses" (after all, it's his phone that's running his life now) a feed full of fake news instead of Rebecca, his potential love interest. The fictional narrative ends when Ben, now radicalized, attends a protest that devolves into chaos. His older sister (the much wiser Cass who had been adamant about the dangers of technology from the beginning) sees him through the crowd, recognizes he's in trouble, and exits her car to save him. However, both are mistaken for agitators and arrested. Melodramatic to its core, this unique addition provides a more relatable illustration of the perils surrounding the latest form of digital technology: it's the family, and specifically the kids, that bear the brunt of this problem.

To further *The Social Dilemma*'s root argument, that our tools are controlling us, Ben's scenes end with a depiction of what social media is evolving into. In these short sections, we see a darkened room, lit only by the glow of computer screens, along with three identical men who serve as manifestations of the computer algorithms behind platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The men (clones or some sort of futuristic cyborg) are singular in their focus: keeping Ben staring at his phone. They know him better than he knows himself, and they frequently use this knowledge to sell his attention to companies. The implication being that human society is no longer facing a passive computer program. Instead, the three quasi-humans embody how the algorithms, responsible for what pops up on someone's social media feed, are capable of thought and manipulation.

*The Social Dilemma* touches on pressing societal issues, but instead of investigating them, Orłowski uses them as opportunities to generate fear. For example, halfway through, we're introduced to one of the few non-tech people, Jonathan Haidt, professor of social psychology at the NYU Stern School of Business and the author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (this description accompanies his initial appearance on screen). Haidt argues a significant increase in suicide and non-fatal self-harm in girls between the ages of ten and nineteen is a product of a social media generation. Haidt's argument, as presented here, embodies the defining component of this fear discourse: complicated issues are reduced to simplified, yet powerful cause-and-effect narratives. Cultural and academic critics have long decried the onus society places on women to be physically beautiful from a young age, and indeed, Sarah Banet-Weiser examines this very thing in "Gender, Social Media, and the Labor of Authenticity." As part of a special forum on authenticity for *American Quarterly*, Banet-Weiser

acknowledges these platforms have created monetization opportunities for women, but only if they conform to “dominant white, cis-gender norms” when it comes to beauty.<sup>74</sup> She goes on to point out that “Women have been historically told (through all sorts of media and institutions) that their ‘real’ selves are not good enough.”<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, Banet-Weiser’s point is that women are held to a different standard when it comes to authentic representations on social media. This in no way invalidates Haidt’s section, but it does illustrate how this part of *The Social Dilemma* presents a very simplistic view of a concerning trend. In the context of the documentary, the issue is social media, not the complicated history of women and their relationship with media and institutions. Haidt’s contribution is barely two minutes, and his scene ends (though he continues speaking) while the film shifts to the youngest child of the fictional family. As she stares into a bathroom mirror, tears well up in her eyes as she tries a variety of hair styles to hide her ears, the subject of a recent mean comment delivered by social media. What could be stronger than envisioning your own child, locked in the family bathroom, crying alone?

Haidt’s brief inclusion taps into one of the most powerful tropes in all of society, protecting the children. This is an important topic, yet instead of a nuanced discussion about social media and its place within a larger cultural landscape, we get fear mongering and a crying child. Lost in *The Social Dilemma* is the fact that public health scholars argue for examining social media as part of a larger environment. In a literature review for the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, Deborah Richards, Patrina HY Caldwell, and Henry Go summarize studies

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<sup>74</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Gender, Social Media, and the Labor of Authenticity,” *American Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2021): pp. 141-144, 142.

<sup>75</sup> Banet-Weiser, 142.

that “conclude that social media is just another channel through which schoolyard bullying now reaches the home; the root of the problem is the bullying that stems from the social environment.”<sup>76</sup> In talking about studies that linked Facebook to depression, Richards et al write “we propose that Facebook depression is not a distinct medical condition caused directly by social media, but is a symptom of internal and external influences.”<sup>77</sup> What they acknowledge, and what texts like *The Social Dilemma* ignore, is that the latest technological evolution is best viewed as part of a larger human landscape. Haidt might very well talk about these things in his work, but none of it is included in *The Social Dilemma*. Instead, Orlowski presents this expert as proof of the danger of social media, and social media alone.

From the documentary’s opening moments, there is no confusion about its intent to scare people. It begins with eerie music (with subtitles enabled, it actually says “[eerie instrumental music playing]”) and a quote from the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles: “Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.” Sophocles is known for his tragedies, and what follows is the story of an unfolding American tragedy. The first three minutes involve isolated shots where the film’s expert subjects offer ominous one or two sentence statements like, “These things, you release them, and they take on a life of their own” and “Nobody, I deeply believe, ever intended any of these consequences.” The introduction ends with the documentarian asking what the problem is. While it’s a simple query, particularly given the jobs these people once had, the

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<sup>76</sup> Deborah Richards, Patrina HY Caldwell, and Henry Go, “Impact of Social Media on the Health of Children and Young People,” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 51, no. 12 (2015): pp. 1152-1157, 1153.

<sup>77</sup> Richards, Caldwell, and Go, 1154.

question visibly flummoxes everyone. No one can quite articulate why social media is so dangerous. Orlowski's documentary begins by showcasing the gravity of the situation, yet in doing so, he also lays bare one of the major flaws of *The Social Dilemma*: social media, as part of a larger societal landscape, is an incredibly complicated topic. It's understandable his experts falter when asked to articulate their concern for this very reason, but Orlowski frames their verbal stumbles as evidence for a problem so enormous even those who created it can't describe it.

This sense of knowing something is wrong, yet not being able to articulate it is a powerful stylistic tool because it allows people to make a variety of causal connections. Act 1, Scene 4 of *Hamlet* plays to this sense of the unknown when Marcellus utters a line that's instructive for understanding this fear discourse. As this scene begins, all the characters present (Marcellus, Horatio, and Hamlet) know something is wrong in their country. A ghost that looks like their deceased king has been haunting the battlements, and it now beckons Hamlet to follow. Upon watching the prince leave with the apparition, Marcellus mutters, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."<sup>78</sup> While Marcellus doesn't know exactly what is wrong in his country, he knows enough that when he sees a ghost resembling his former king, he recognizes there's a problem. Likewise, *The Social Dilemma* begins with a host of former executives talking about the dangers of social media, yet they never clearly articulate the danger. They don't have to though. Fear narratives about technology are so prevalent that an audience, with Orlowski's careful editing, can immediately link social media to issues found throughout the country. Just to

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<sup>78</sup> William Shakespeare, "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson, 2003), 1.4.90.

be safe though, moments later a series of short videos from network and cable news shows does what the experts couldn't. Recognizable news sets like *60s Minutes* and anchors like NBC's Lester Holt accompany a variety of news programs that include lines like "A new study sheds light on the link between mental health and social media use" and "Our democracy is under assault." This mashup ends with an interview guest saying, "I think the tools that have been created today are starting to erode the social fabric of how society works." *The Social Dilemma's* initial experts don't have to articulate a clear answer about the problem because Orlowski reminds his audience of what they've already heard. Something is rotten in the US, and the culprit is social media.

There is but one instance where someone offers a counter narrative, but it's quickly passed over in favor of a tenuous cause-and-effect fear relationship. During a panel at the Chicago Anti-Trust Tech Conference, Tristan Harris (the most prominent reformed tech insider of the documentary) points out previous digital tools, like Photoshop, didn't invest massive resources into keeping its users hooked. Dr. Murphy, a University of Chicago economics professor, responds by saying, "the methods used to play on people's ability to be addicted or to be influenced may be different this time, and they probably are different. They were different when newspapers came in and the printing press came in, and they were different when television came in." He goes on to point out "that new level has happened so many times before. I mean, this is just the latest new level that we've seen." In effect, Murphy asks Harris to explain why this iteration is different, but this is the last we hear from the panel. We don't hear any more of Harris and Murphy's exchange. Instead, the film shifts back to an isolated shot of Harris, who says, "There's this narrative that, you know, 'we'll just adapt to it. We'll learn how to live with

these devices, just like we've learned how to live with everything else.' And what this misses is there's something distinctly new here." While Harris never explains what makes this different, a Sundance summary does: "Technology wizards have masterminded a new form of capitalism, and humanity is now the raw resource feeding the machine. Powerful, hidden artificial intelligence tasked with hijacking our attention is tearing apart social norms, jeopardizing truth and democracy, and putting civilization on a programmed path toward self-destruction."<sup>79</sup> This accurately captures the fear circulating throughout Orlowski's film. Reminiscent of cinematic franchises like *The Matrix* and *Terminator*, Orlowski – and his expert witnesses – argue the latest forms of technology are running rampant throughout the world, and if left unchecked, will eventually destroy humanity.

*The Social Dilemma* plays to a deep-rooted cultural fear involving whether humans are in control of their tools, or whether those tools have grown to control them. Immediately after Harris's comment about this iteration being different from its predecessors, the film cuts to Randima Fernando, Co-Founder, along with Harris, of the Center for Humane Technology. Fernando notes that since the 1960s, computer "processing power has gone up about a trillion times," but in comparison, the human brain hasn't evolved at all. After a handful of similar comments from various documentary subjects, the section ends with one of them saying, "they're [computerized systems] controlling, you know, the information that we see, they're controlling us more than we're controlling them." The concern of the documentary isn't that social media is damaging people, it's that nonhuman entities are doing the damage. The idea that

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<sup>79</sup> "The Social Dilemma" (Sundance Institute, 2020), <https://www.sundance.org/projects/the-social-dilemma>.

information wasn't controlled prior to social media is ludicrous, but then it was controlled by people in the form of editors, producers, newscasters, marketers, governments, etc. Why we should be afraid of machines and algorithms controlling information instead of people isn't explained, though *The Social Dilemma* implies society will be worse off when technology makes those decisions instead of people.

In *A Dangerous Master: How to Keep Technology from Slipping Beyond Our Controls*, technology ethicist Wendall Wallach engages concerns surrounding automated weapons platforms, and I think this offers insight into how current societal conversations about social media place human morality on a pedestal. While the platforms Wallach is concerned about don't exist per se, unmanned drones are a step towards something completely automated. Wallach's major concern is that AI-like platforms lack any sort of morality or ethics, and therefore should not be autonomous in their decisions regarding who lives and who dies.<sup>80</sup> On the surface, that makes sense, but history is riddled with humans doing truly awful things to each other. Millions upon millions of people have died throughout history, and later we look back and wonder what happened to the perpetrators' morals and ethics. How could Germans have gone along with the atrocities committed under Hitler? Or the Russians under Stalin? Or Americans as their government wiped out indigenous cultures? Where was the empathy and morality as millions of innocent people were slaughtered? *The Social Dilemma* limits itself to questions of social media, but that root concern falls victim to this same flawed logic, one that views

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<sup>80</sup> Wendell Wallach, *A Dangerous Master: How to Keep Technology from Slipping Beyond Our Control* (New York: Basic, 2015), 213.

computer programs doing the work of humans in a dangerous light simply because it's not humans making those decisions anymore.

The entirety of the documentary is a series of first-hand accounts depicting the dangerous side of tech companies, and the audience walks away terrified about the state of society. If it wasn't clear enough, as the movie draws to a close, there is an exchange between Harris and senator John Tester at a U.S. Senate hearing on persuasive technology. As the committee questions Harris, Tester asks, "This scares me to death...do you see it the same way? Or am I overreacting to a situation that I don't know enough about?" Harris doesn't respond, he just nods in earnest agreement, as if to say this should scare everyone to death. Immediately after, the documentarian (off screen) asks subjects to offer their predictions for the future. The first says, "I think, in the...in the shortest time horizon, civil war." Technology writer Jaron Lanier then offers an even more dire warning:

If we go down the current status quo for, let's say, another 20 years, we probably destroy our civilization through willful ignorance. We probably fail to meet the challenge of climate change. We probably degrade the world's democracies so that they fall into some sort of bizarre autocratic dysfunction. We probably ruin the global economy. Uh, we probably, um, don't survive.

This perspective falls victim to a then/now binary in which the complexities and conflicts of the past are smoothed out in favor of a polemical view of current societal issues. For example, a "bizarre autocratic dysfunction" would be a fitting term for the governments the US worked to install in Latin America in the 70s and 80s during the Cold War. This could also explain the last two decades of US involvement in the Middle East, where the US once again brought "democracy" to the rest of the world, regardless of if those countries wanted it. The global economy has been built on labor economies that border on slave systems and have contributed to an ever-widening income gap in the US. I mention these because one of the staples of this fear

discourse is that the past comes to be viewed as the ideal since it lacked our current problems. When put under just a cursory view though, quotes like Lanier's, while terrifying, are flawed views of reality. Social media didn't create these things: they existed before.

The final fifteen minutes feature Orłowski's subjects offering a glimmer of hope, yet even this is tempered by the magnitude of the problem. During the credits, individuals offer specific advice like turning off notifications on your phone, not viewing recommendations you would find at the end of a YouTube video (funny given this is a Netflix documentary), and being open to having earnest conversations about the dangers of social media. The issue here though, is that these solutions, while individually viable, don't address the problem on a large scale. After over an hour of scare tactics, ending with such a trite solution compounds the problem, as it does nothing to address the fear components the documentary has focused on. Senator Tester asks if he's overreacting, and based on what Orłowski presents, the answer is no. *The Social Dilemma* presents a very convincing and terrifying account of how technology is leading us down a path towards complete and utter destruction, and its solutions in no way rise to level of fear it has created.

There is a brief moment that broaches an actual solution, but it's quickly skipped over because it would require a complicated discussion. In drawing attention to a lack of federal oversight regarding YouTube, Harris points out that advertising during Saturday morning cartoons was regulated because the audience was primarily children:

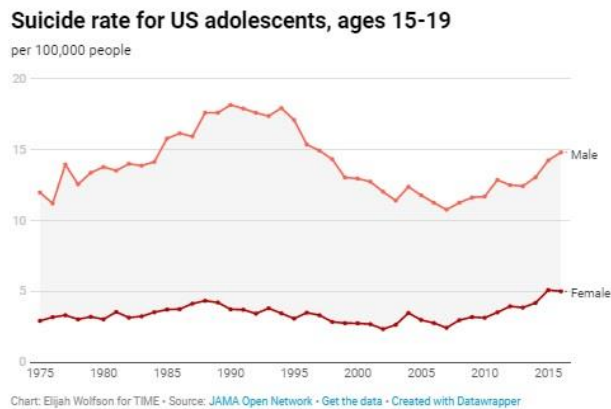
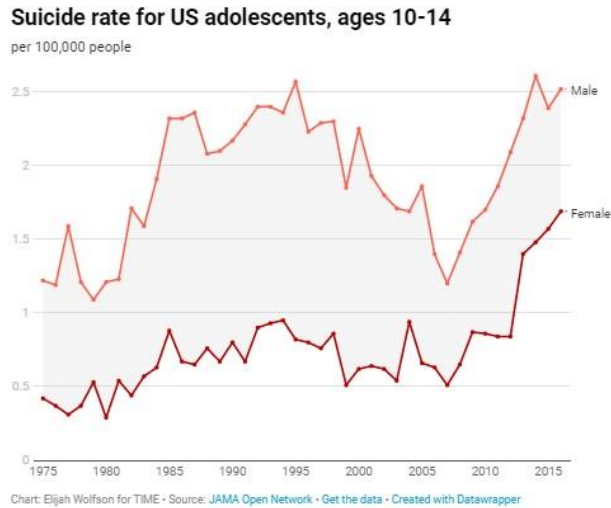
When children watched Saturday morning cartoons, we cared about protecting children. We would say, "You can't advertise to these age children in these ways." But then you take YouTube for Kids and it gobbles up that entire portion of the attention economy, and now all kids are exposed to YouTube for Kids. And all those protections and all those regulations are gone.

Here, Harris places the blame on a lack of regulation when it comes to platforms like YouTube, but in the greater context of *The Social Dilemma*, the blame is placed squarely on YouTube itself. The documentary begins with Orłowski's subjects saying they left tech companies due to ethical concerns about business practices, yet the focus itself is on just the dangers posed by these products. Concern over social media is absolutely warranted: it's an incredibly powerful component of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The problems, however, laid out in glaring fashion throughout these ninety minutes are problems that result from a country and people unwilling, or unable, to regulate powerful businesses. But regulating the internet is a hugely complex issue, so it's far easier to demonize the newest form of technology.

The flaws throughout *The Social Dilemma* become apparent when we utilize a “dirty house” metaphor. This comes from Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner's *The Ambivalent Internet* where this metaphor is used to explain societal norms and taboos: dirt “only makes sense in relation to the concept of cleanliness. Clean comes first; dirt comes second, and is what sullies the clean. Based on this reasoning, one surefire way to reconstruct a specific culture's value system is to unpack what that particular culture regards as dirty, i.e. strange, abnormal, or taboo.”<sup>81</sup> Phillips and Milner explain how this metaphor, as a heuristic, often reveals the “clean,” when it comes to societal standards, was usually quite dirty to begin with. For example, Dr. Haidt's section in *The Social Dilemma* presents an uptick in suicide rates amongst girls as a product of the digital age. With this metaphor in mind, we must ask what happened before, and the data here present a more complicated picture. In a 2019 article for *Time*, Jamie Ducharme

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<sup>81</sup> Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 12.



Researchers reached those conclusions by analyzing the roughly 85,000 youth suicide deaths logged in a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention database from 1975 to 2016.

Figure 2. Graphs from Ducharme’s *Time* article paint a more complicated picture than Orłowski’s film.

presents a more complex story.<sup>82</sup> There has been a drastic increase in one demographic – which is absolutely concerning – but the rates amongst boys are still comparable to the mid-90s. This doesn’t render Dr. Haidt’s concern incorrect or misplaced, as Donna Ruch, one of the co-

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<sup>82</sup> Jamie Ducharme, “The Gap between Boys’ and Girls’ Suicide Rates Is Closing,” *Time* (Time, May 17, 2019), <https://time.com/5590344/youth-suicide-rates/>.

researchers points out in saying, “Any time we see shifts in trends by gender we want to be aware, because when we think about suicide prevention, we want to take into account gender difference.”<sup>83</sup> Haidt’s larger concern that social media is causing an uptick in rates amongst girls could still be correct, but the point is that suicide amongst kids was an issue before social media, and as such, addressing only social media isn’t likely to stop the problem.

In isolation, there’s not anything wrong with Haidt’s section from *The Social Dilemma*, but in the greater fear-of-technology discourse it leads to problems going unaddressed. We, as a society, should be concerned with substantial increases in things like self-harm and suicide. That’s obvious. However, as part of a fear text like Orlowski’s documentary, one that relies on real/digital and then/now binary thinking, Haidt’s section creates the illusion these problems would go away if social media did too, e.g., if we could only get kids to stop spending so much time on Instagram, they wouldn’t be depressed, bullied, etc. We know this isn’t the case, as these issues existed before. Narratives that demonize social media, and social media alone, cater to the notion the platforms are the problem, when it’s substantially more complicated.

In effect, *The Social Dilemma* is an updated version of the “This is your brain on drugs” PSAs from the 1980s and 90s. One section of Orlowski’s film even begins with a quote by Yale professor Edward Tufte the links drugs to social media: “There are only two industries that call their customers ‘users’: illegal drugs and software.” Here, Orlowski tries to generate fear by connecting social media to drugs, in that they both create addiction and lead to widespread horrific impacts on society. However, the US’s War on Drugs has been a colossal failure and

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<sup>83</sup> Ducharme.

given rise to entire trafficking and incarceration industries. It's wrought havoc throughout the globe, yet drug abuse and addiction persist. Similarly, focusing on social media as the defining component of different cultural problems has created an entire fear industry devoted to scaring people. In arguing a ubiquitous component of 21<sup>st</sup> century life is dangerous, these narratives foreground a truly alarming fear where a foundational component of daily existence places people in danger of losing control over their lives.

### Sex and Machines in the Entertainment World

Franchises like *The Matrix* and *Terminator* illustrate the teleologic nature of fear in an overt way, but another part of this discourse involves sexuality and codifies how digital spaces lead to a cheaper version of what it means to be human. The quintessential depiction of loserdom in American society focuses on individuals who are immersed in digital communities, and as a result, are sexually inexperienced/inadequate. This was referenced briefly in *The Social Dilemma*, when Ben foregoes a relationship with Rebecca in favor of staring blankly at his phone. While that story doesn't play up sexuality in the same way *The Big Bang Theory* does, it hints at the same issue: a defining component of young adulthood is in danger thanks to smartphones. This doesn't generate fear per se, but it reminds us that human relationships get left behind as society moves towards a more digitally-mediated existence.

2008's *40-Year-Old Virgin*, starring Steve Carrel as the hapless Andy Sitzler, links Sitzler's sexual inadequacy to his preference for video games and action figures.<sup>84</sup> The movie itself begins with a montage of various nerd culture paraphernalia, highlighting the funny (yet

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<sup>84</sup> *40-Year-Old Virgin*, directed by Judd Apatow (Universal Pictures, 2005).

somewhat pathetic) existence of a man who has replaced “real” life with a variety of “fake” hobbies. Joe Walsh’s “Life of Illusion” accompanies this sequence, and the initial lyrics, “Sometimes \ I can’t help but feeling that I’m \ Living a life of illusion” clue the audience in that Sitzer is leading an inferior life. The movie’s central plot point revolves around Sitzer’s virginity, which is initially revealed through a scene tied to online spaces. Sitzer’s coworkers learn of his sexual inexperience after a poker night where Sitzer dominates. When pressed on why he’s such a good player, Sitzer admits he plays an hour or two of online poker every night, when he’s not playing Halo, a popular video game. Shortly thereafter, much to Sitzer’s embarrassment, the others learn he is, in fact, a virgin.

Sitzer’s hobbies are all poor facsimiles for real relationships, and one scene emphasizes this binary in a literal and figurative manner. Prior to Sitzer’s first date with Trish, whom he will eventually sleep with, his friend Cal implores him to box up everything a woman might find unattractive. Specifically, Cal draws attention to how Sitzer owns “more video games than a teenaged Asian kid.” While this plays to both race and age stereotypes, Cal’s point – that Sitzer has literally filled his life with childish things – is driven home when Trish arrives. Upon peeking inside Sitzer’s door, she asks if he’s moving. In taking Cal’s advice, Sitzer boxed up everything he owns, and the entire apartment is now empty. On a literal level, the scene is visually funny, but it’s also a testament to the real/digital binary. Up until this point, Sitzer has led a life filled with various activities, but when it comes to being a sexually viable mate, none of those have any place in the equation. The amount of time Sitzer has spent in digital spaces is forever linked to his sexual inexperience. This doesn’t lead to the downfall of society in *40-Year-*

*Old Virgin*, but it is partially responsible for the main character's greatest flaw and his missing out on a profoundly important component of human experience.



Figure 3. Screenshots show the gradual deterioration of Penny throughout "The Barbarian Sublimation."

Sexual viability and its connection to digital spaces is one of the foundational components of CBS's long running hit, *The Big Bang Theory*. Thanks to their predilection for video games and comic books, three of the show's central characters, Leonard Hofstadter, Howard Wolowitz, and Raj Koothrappali, routinely find themselves losing out when it comes to dating. However, the most explicit warning of how one's sexual appeal is affected by online worlds comes from an episode centered around Penny, who is Sheldon and Leonard's neighbor. In the "The Barbarian Sublimation" Penny becomes addicted to a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) called *Age of Conan*.<sup>85</sup> The episode begins when Penny locks herself out of her apartment, and while she waits next door for a locksmith, she watches Sheldon

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<sup>85</sup> *The Big Bang Theory*, season 2, episode three, "The Barbarian Sublimation." Directed by Mark Cendrowski, aired October 6, 2008.

play the game and then tries it for herself. She buys it later that night, and the remainder of the episode chronicles her gradual deterioration in physical beauty.

Penny's devolution emphasizes the binary at play in this fear discourse: you either spend time online, or you are productive in the "real" world. A few days into her online binge (second panel), Leonard tries to intervene, telling her, "If a person doesn't have a sense of achievement in their real life, it's easy to lose themselves in a virtual world where they can get a false sense of accomplishment." There is truth in Leonard's comment, in that ignoring friends, family, and health in favor of increasing the power of a video game character would be concerning. Mixed in with this though is the implication Penny gravitates towards this game because her life is empty. Leonard's comment also suggests Penny is becoming someone who has given up on the real world (the people who make up the player base of games like *Age of Conan*). This harkens back to fears over the disappearance of the real/digital binary because a society where people opt for meaningless accomplishments in virtual worlds instead of working towards being successful, productive members of their communities is a society destined to fail. This episode is a hyperbolic take on online gaming meant to generate laughs, but it's this type of thinking that fuels articles like Hughes's "Study shows we're spending an insane amount of time online." For Hughes, Penny would embody what spending 6+ hours a day on the internet looks like, and it's not pretty.

There is brief commentary on being a productive member of society, but this is an episode centered on sexuality and the insinuation those who play video games are unappealing. Later in the episode, while eating lunch at their university, fellow research scientist Leslie Winkler offers a different explanation for Penny's blossoming addiction: "I would postulate that

she's escaping into the online world to compensate for her sexual frustration." Howard jumps in by saying, "I do that too...but probably in a different way." While comedic, this exchange emphasizes video games preclude sexual activity. In Penny's case, she has turned to digital spaces to fill a temporary void in her life, whereas for Howard, his long-running embrace of video games has made this a semi-permanent affliction. As the plot continues, Penny's addiction builds, and she continually disrupts Sheldon's life in seeking advice on the game. Sheldon then signs Penny up for online dating (panel 3), believing her addiction to be a product of sexual frustration. Upon selecting a match and orchestrating a meeting, the potential suitor, Tom, rejects Penny after seeing what she looks like as a full-blown-MMORPG addict. Penny's change is captured best as Tom leaves and tells Sheldon, "I'm sorry, dude. She didn't look anything like her picture." The final scene of the episode sees Howard appearing as his in-game *Conan* character and asking Penny out for an afternoon of questing and then an in-game drink at the virtual tavern. Penny agrees, and as they walk away, she exclaims, "Oh, my god. I need help." Realizing what she's become, she slams her laptop shut, throws it across the couch and buries it beneath a pillow (panel 4). That she now considers Howard an acceptable companion illustrates just how far she has fallen.

Narratives like *40-Year-Old Virgin* and *The Big Bang Theory* imply there's something wrong with digitally-mediated activities, though in reality, explaining why they're problematic is a difficult endeavor. A linchpin of the real(good)/digital(bad) dichotomy is articles in which scholars examine the connection between, for example, low self-esteem in kids and the amount of time spent on social media. I examine a handful of these studies later, but in general, researchers find a correlation between a negative sense of well-being and time spent on social

media. However, the ubiquity of the cultural tropes found throughout American society regarding the inferiority of online spaces makes it difficult to parse whether these studies are identifying cause and effect relationships or if they're a result of kids internalizing societal ideas that argue a large part of their lives are inferior and/or problematic.

### The Apocalyptic Future

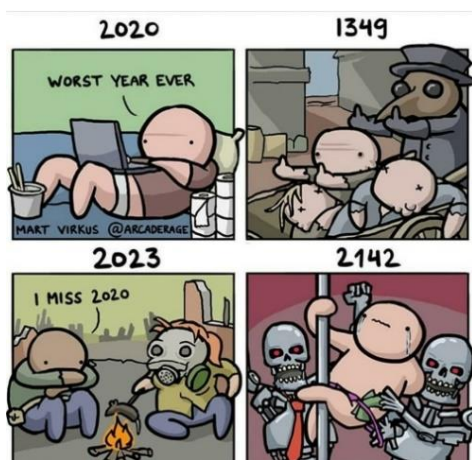


Figure 4. Mart Virkus's comic illustrates the cultural relevancy of *The Terminator* franchise: the robots of the fourth panel are modelled after the machines from the films.

The *Terminator* franchise is one of the most famous in all of American film, and its reach is far from just entertainment circles. In explaining the power of computer algorithms in *The Social Dilemma*, Tristan Harris says, “When you think of A I, you know, an AI’s gonna ruin the world, and you see, like, a Terminator, and you see Arnold Schwarzenegger.” He goes on to argue that the machine learning and algorithms behind social media, while different than what we see in *The Terminator* movies, are effectively AI programs. Orlowski’s inclusion of this passage illustrates how much cultural power these movies have. His audience might not have

seen the films, but referencing AI and Schwarzenegger helps because it's such a famous part of popular culture. Harris resorts to a *Terminator* reference because its popularity assists in making his point.<sup>86</sup>

Despite a lack of critical or financial success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this franchise remains a staple of US culture because it synthesizes societal fears across a twenty-year span into the larger fear narrative about a technological apocalypse. To date, there have been six major motion pictures, a Fox television series, and two separate web series devoted to the fictional world in which humanity is locked in a struggle with a malevolent AI and its robot army. Five out of the six films feature the same basic plotline: a futuristic AI sends a machine back in time to kill someone who will eventually be vital to the human resistance.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, humans also send someone, or in later films a reprogrammed Terminator, back to protect the target. The human contingent then fights a series of losing skirmishes against far superior technology before eventually winning. Their victory also halts Judgment Day, the date when the AI would go live and launch the world's various automated-weapons systems, ushering in the age of machines. While Arnold Schwarzenegger's appeal as the iconic T-800 machine has helped the series survive, his presence alone does not explain the franchise's longevity, particularly given its recent lack of success. The continued popularity of these movies is, in part, a product of their ability to invoke latent fears regarding technological evolution.

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<sup>86</sup> Mart Virkus, "2020 Is the Worst Year," *Arcade Rage*, September 5, 2020, <https://arcaderage.co/2020/09/05/2020-worst-year/>.

<sup>87</sup> 2009's *Terminator Salvation* departed from the general plot of the rest of the franchise, in that it focused on the futuristic battle (set in 2018) between the machines and humans.

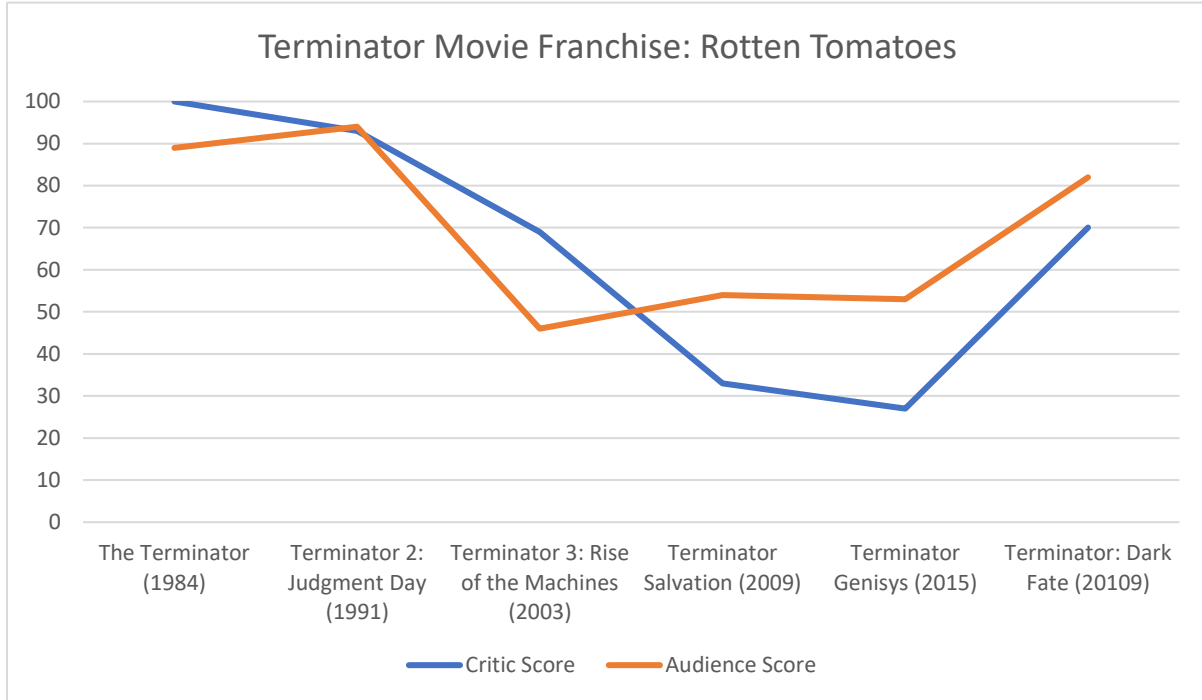


Figure 6. Despite poor critical response, Hollywood continues to make *Terminator* movies, ensuring the franchise remains part of the country's cultural landscape.

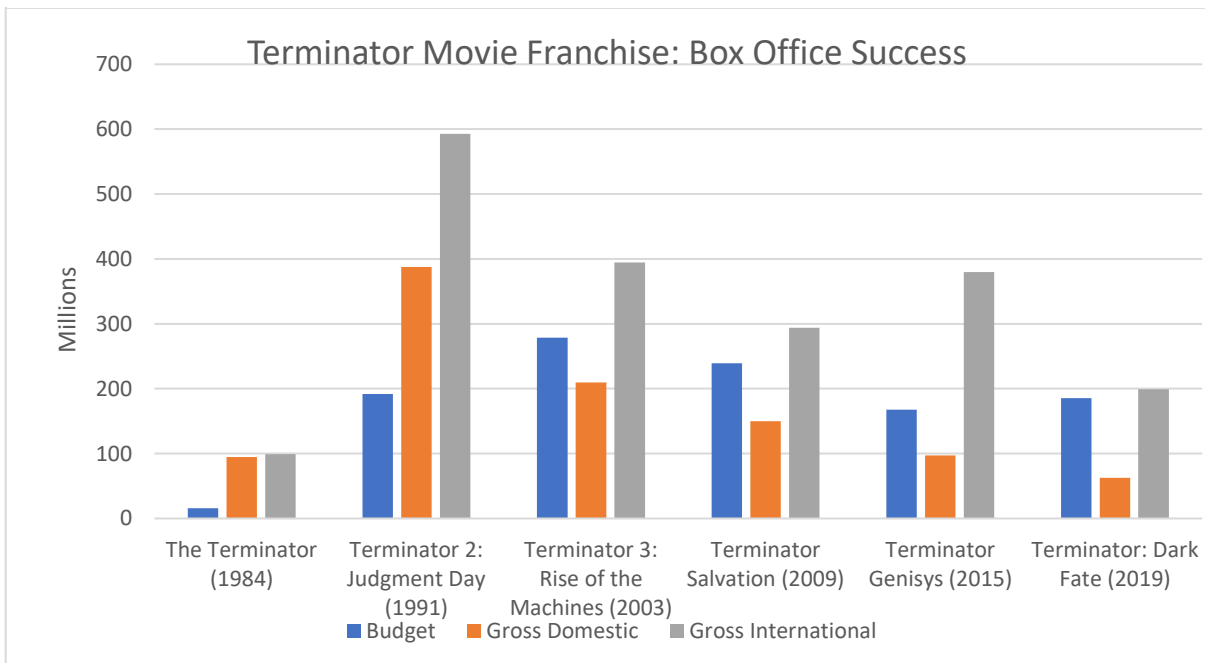


Figure 5. When adjusted for inflation, this franchise presents a complicated picture of the movie business in the 21st century. While the films are not commercial successes in the US, they have recouped their budget in international markets. Yet the continued decline in US returns mirrors the steady decrease in critical reception.

The *Terminator* movies serve as an excellent illustration of the evolutionary continuum society is in by depicting what the end point could look like while also including references that mirror the talking points of their respective release dates. The primary fear in these movies is that machines will eventually take over our lives, and while far-fetched in this Hollywood depiction, this franchise includes very current, very real concerns regarding new technology, which assists in strengthening the teleologic nature of fear. For example, human augmentation and surveillance drones are important parts of 2019's *Terminator: Dark Fate*, and both are actual concerns in the US. We don't need to be concerned about time travelling, mimetic robots made out of liquid metal, but as Harris reminds us, something similar to AI is already here. This was the point of those sci-fi scenes following Ben's sections in *The Social Dilemma*, where creepy human clones (playing the role of computer algorithms) control him through his phone.

2003's *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* begins with a John Connor voice-over that speaks to a (at the time) growing concern over the potentially negative impacts of a more connected world.<sup>88</sup> As Connor speeds through a California highway on a motorcycle, we hear his voice talking about the need to live off the grid, unconnected to other people. He does this so the machines can't send something back in time to assassinate him. There's another layer to this concern though, one that recognizes how an evolving digital landscape has made it easier for government authorities to keep tabs on people. Later in the film, Schwarzenegger's character (now a good, reprogramed terminator) confirms this, saying the assassin machine (a T-X) was originally sent to kill Connor's lieutenants because it couldn't locate Connor himself. It was only

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<sup>88</sup> *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, directed by Jonathan Mostow (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2003).

by accident that the T-X stumbles upon Connor, thus setting the film's main plot into motion. Later movies focus on how human life is intimately connected to digital spaces (and thus in danger and/or decay), but here, this concern comes across in a nascent form: at the time, Connor was beyond the reach of the machines because he refused to participate in this digital turn.

The franchise's worst film, *Terminator: Genisys*, contains the most overt instances of plot points reflecting concerns over the role of technology in human lives.<sup>8990</sup> Midway through the movie, while Sarah Connor and Kyle Reese receive treatment in a hospital, Reese asks their nurse about Genisys (the 2017 version of Skynet that will eventually lead to destruction). The nurse responds with a description that could very well come from a 2017 advertisement for the most recent Apple or Android product: "Genisys does everything. My phone will link to my tablet will link to my computer will link to my car...Everything in my life uploaded and online 24/7. Totally connected." After the orderly's comment, Reese and Connor exchange an alarmed look, emphasizing the deeply troubling nature of his statement. This connected nature has very little to do with the overall plot though. Judgment Day involves the AI turning the world's

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<sup>89</sup> *Terminator: Genisys*, directed by Alan Taylor (Paramount Pictures, 2015).

<sup>90</sup> I skip over a lot of plot detail here because this film gets hopelessly mired in time-travel muck. Short version: John Connor, the leader of the resistance, sends his right-hand man, Kyle Reese, back to 1984 to protect Sarah Connor (his mother). Once there, instead of travelling into the future to 1997 (the original Judgment Day when machines began to take over the world) they travel into the future (2017) to stop a different kind of Judgment Day. Apparently, the future from which Kyle Reese came stopped the one in 1997 but couldn't stop the one in 2017. Reese knows this because of brief "memories" he has while travelling back in time. Once he and Sarah Connor arrive in 2017, they learn John Connor has been turned into some sort of cyborg and has also returned to 2017 to stop them from stopping this version of Judgment Day. This cyborg John Connor can't simply kill Reese and Connor because that would mean he's never born. In terms of critical commentary, this entry serves as the franchise's low point.

weaponry against humans; the amount of time those humans spend on social media has little impact on bombs dropping. This scene, brief as it is, “works” because our society holds ingrained notions that technology use somehow equates with a more perilous way of life. This mirrors Lanier’s doomsday quote in *The Social Dilemma*, where screen time will be responsible for the collapse of democracy and the global economy. Neither make much sense, but this hospital exchange serves as a touchstone for current societal concerns, where being totally connected will bring about the ruination of society.

If concerns over the connected nature of life are only tenuously linked to the film’s plot, the role of automated weaponry in *Terminator: Genisys* is both integral and a substantive concern in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lest you think the overall premise of the franchise is ridiculous, Wallach devotes an entire section to this in *A Dangerous Master*. His chapter, “Terminating the Terminator,” begins with his attempt to get a US presidential order passed in 2012 that would limit “the development of lethal autonomous robots (killer robots).”<sup>91</sup> He, and others, are concerned that automated killing platforms will eventually remove human control, and thus accompanying ethics and morality, from the equation. Even Wallach can’t resist the urge to reference this iconic series, both in using it as a chapter title, and as a point of analysis:

*The Terminator* is clearly science fiction, but it speaks to a powerful intuition that the robotization of warfare is a slippery slope – the end point of which can neither be predicted nor fully controlled. Machines capable of initiating lethal force and the advent of technological singularity are future-oriented themes, but function as placeholders for more immediate concerns. The computer industry has begun to develop systems with a degree of autonomy and capable of machine learning.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Wallach, *A Dangerous Master*, 213.

<sup>92</sup> Wallach, 229.

Moments after Reese and Connor have their Genisys exchange, and the audience laments all the problems a “fully connected” world entails, the scene shifts to the downstairs lobby and Schwarzenegger walks in, ready to save his human charges. While he strides through, a news show plays in the background that features an interview with the creator of Genisys, Danny Dyson. We first hear Dyson clearly, when he says, “It’s more than a lifestyle tool. It’s the future.” To which the host responds, “Genisys isn’t just for consumers. Its integration into our military is leading some to ask whether our reliance on machines could go too far.” Moments later we again hear this fictional (yet very real) conversation, as the anchor asks, “But you’re talking about a system that is capable of real-time decision making. Aren’t you worried it could become smarter than us?” Dyson responds: “Smarter? No. We’re in control. It doesn’t think for itself, it thinks for us. Cyberdyne is not just going to change lives. It’s going to save them.” Here, we see the worst possible response to the concerns raised by Wallach, in that the creators of this AI overestimate their power and ability to control it.

Throughout these movies, the assassin machines rely on current technology to help track their prey, and the most recent film, *Terminator: Dark Fate* combines this trope with current societal concerns.<sup>93</sup> Whereas the T-X in *Rise of the Machines* relied on a connection into police communication systems to find its targets, *Dark Fate* sees the Rev-9 (the newest iteration of the assassin robot) use a drone network for similar ends. At one point, Sarah Connor, Maya (the eventual resistance leader in this timeline), and Grace (an augmented human sent back to save Maya) try to sneak into the US from Mexico. Knowing this group must get to the US, the Rev-9

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<sup>93</sup> *Terminator: Dark Fate*, directed by Tim Miller (Paramount Pictures, 2019).

enters a Border Patrol drone control container, locates the trio, and then directs agents to arrest them. Through new surveillance methods, and a machine ability to analyze massive amounts of data, the Rev-9 finds the proverbial needle in a haystack. This reflects a very real concern involving digital surveillance, as Jay Greene's *Washington Post* article, "Microsoft won't sell police its facial-recognition technology, following similar moves by Amazon and IBM," makes clear. These technology giants made this decision because they worry these programs could infringe on people's civil rights, as Jay Greene notes in writing, "Privacy advocates have long raised concerns that police use of facial-recognition could lead to the wrongful arrests of people who bear only a resemblance to a video image. And studies have shown that facial-recognition systems misidentify people of color more often than white people."<sup>94</sup> Surveillance systems, like automated weapons platforms, are fraught with ethical concerns, but put together these plot devices underscore the teleologic nature of a fear of technology. In thirteen years, the movies have gone from staying off the grid to law enforcement's usage of drones, highlighting the evolving nature of technology and emphasizing the slippery slope Wallach was concerned with.

*The Matrix* trilogy plays to a similar fear of technology, but the real/digital binary carries greater weight given the film's foundation. The overall premise of the franchise is that a simulated world, designed by machines, misleads people about the true state of their existence. Early on, in explaining the reality of humanity's plight, Morpheus says, "You've been living in a

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<sup>94</sup> Jay Greene, "Microsoft Won't Sell Police Its Facial-Recognition Technology, Following Similar Moves by Amazon and IBM," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, June 11, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/11/microsoft-facial-recognition/>.

dreamworld Neo. This is the world as it exists today.”<sup>95</sup> He then shows reality, a gray, post-apocalyptic wasteland. And thus, the heroes’ primary goal comes into focus: wake people from their matrix-induced slumber. Then, and only then, will humanity be able to live a “real” life. While today’s technology critics aren’t concerned with living in the Matrix, the underlying fear is that people spending time in online spaces miss out on “real” life. In this way, 21<sup>st</sup> century fears over excessive screen time mirror the central plot point of *The Matrix* and assist in making a decidedly sci-fi narrative more relatable and current fears more apocalyptic.

The three movies include an evolving real/digital dichotomy that ends with the possibility for equilibrium between the human and machine worlds, but only if humans exert dominance over technology. When Morpheus initially explains humanity’s predicament, he says the turning point was mankind’s invention of AI. Shortly thereafter, machines and humans went to war, a conflict that has continued for several hundred years<sup>96</sup>. Everything in the first film is oriented around a clear distinction between humans and machines. *The Matrix Reloaded* continues this idea but includes some discussion of the importance of machines in daily life (the boundaries of that dichotomy are blurring). *The Matrix Revolutions* sees this binary ultimately break down, as the film ends with machines and humans negotiating a peace treaty. But this isn’t a corrective to the apocalyptic language of Boelstorff because peace is possible only after Neo defeats Mr. Smith, the most powerful program in the Matrix. The message being that in order for the

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<sup>95</sup> *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowskis (Warner Brothers, 1999).

<sup>96</sup> In a conversation Neo has with the Architect at the end of *The Matrix Reloaded*, we learn this scenario has played out five times before, so this “war” has been going on for closer to 1000 years.

apocalyptic nature of the real/digital binary to be resolved, humankind must exert dominance over technology.

The first film, *The Matrix*, lays out the philosophical underpinnings of this fear discourse in a way that predicts the concerns American society has twenty years later. In Neo's initial meeting, Morpheus tells him, "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us...it is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." The truth, of course, being that most of humanity lives only in a virtual world so that machines can harvest their energy. Upon being unplugged and rescued by Morpheus and his crew, Neo returns via a training program to better understand the simulation most of humanity lives in. Here, Morpheus offers the most defining explanation in asking once again, "What is the Matrix? Control." He then switches off a television to demonstrate what humans have been unable to do for centuries, before continuing in saying, "The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this." He then shows Neo a battery.

Morpheus's battery example shares similarities with the time-travelling killer robots of *The Terminator*: both are science-fiction scenarios, but they still mirror current fear discourses surrounding digital technology. *The Social Dilemma* (and similar texts) focus on how technology has greatly reduced the human experience, which is the overall plot of *The Matrix* films. In the futuristic world of the Wachowskis, people are no longer living real, authentic, human lives. By itself, this is scary enough, but the bigger issue is that most don't even know they have been corrupted. That's the point Orlowski's film tries to make over and over: humanity has been duped by technology. *The Social Dilemma* does this through Ben's sections where he's portrayed as subservient to his social media platform, and as a result forgoes "real" relationships. The scary

part is Ben doesn't even realize what has happened to him. At one point in the documentary, Harris references *The Matrix* directly in talking about how people are clueless about what companies are taking from them: "So, it really is this kind of prison experiment where we're just, you know, roping people into the Matrix, and we're just harvesting all this money and data from all their activity to profit from."<sup>97</sup> Later, in talking about the proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories, Justin Rosenstein (former engineer at Facebook and Google) adds, "it's as though we have less and less control over who we are and what we believe."<sup>98</sup> While Morpheus's comments predate this documentary by two decades, the ideas are almost identical. The roles have been reversed, and now technology is using and profiting off of people, many of whom are clueless about the situation.

Not only does this emphasis on technology as a manifestation of evil rely on binary thinking, it also betrays the racial components of fear discourses. Fears of some outweigh the fears of others, despite the bodies of subaltern peoples frequently being those who are exploited. In a recorded debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley about whether the American Dream has been achieved at the expense of African Americans, Baldwin begins by arguing the southern economy was, literally, built upon the exploitation of black labor. This is decades before Americanists begin discussing the Global South and Global North, but the idea is the same in both instances: economies have defined, usually in very negative ways, how people throughout the Americas experience life. Yet, in the *Matrix*, we see largely white characters

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<sup>97</sup> Orlowski, *The Social Dilemma*, 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Orlowski.

fighting to rescue humanity. Now we need be afraid of digital technology, as it could eventually impinge on the lives of white America. It's now white America that is in potential danger of a form of capitalist enterprise (technology).

In *The Matrix Reloaded*, Neo returns to Zion (humanity's last free city) and has a conversation with a councilman that calls into question the flawed notion of a real/digital binary. Far beneath the city, the councilman tells Neo why he likes to wander throughout the engineering level late at night: "I like to be reminded the city survives because of these machines. These machines are keeping us alive, while other machines are coming to kill us." Neo responds by echoing Morpheus's sentiments from the first movie: "But we control these machines, they don't control us...If we wanted, we could shut these machines down." The councilman acknowledges the truth of this, but then points out they would most certainly die if they shut these machines down, as they would lose things like their water and air purification systems. It's not as simple as merely shutting things down, and this realization makes Neo visibly uncomfortable. This type of uneasy realization underlies the entire fear of technology discourse, in that we can't simply eliminate digital forms of technology from our lives. This is a minor point in the second film, but Neo's unease represents the type of fear present throughout society, in that texts acknowledge the gargantuan nature of the problem yet offer no solutions. This exchange hints that a clear distinction between what it means to be human and what it means to be a form of technology is not as obvious as we might like to think. For many, that's an uncomfortable realization, particularly given the proliferation of fear texts that rely on a clear real/digital binary. However, much in the same way Neo must decide whether to trust elements of the machine world, people

can't continue pretending social media is an aberrant platform that can be ignored or singled out as problematic. It's part of society and must be treated as such.

The third film, *The Matrix Revolutions*, offers a quasi-resolution to the apocalyptic language of the real/digital binary, but only if humans demonstrate power over technology. The climax of the initial trilogy sees Neo fight a rogue program, Mr. Smith. Initially, Smith is an Agent, a computer program sent into the Matrix to track down and eliminate figures like Neo and Morpheus (if someone dies while plugged into the Matrix they die in real life). Smith serves as Neo's primary antagonist throughout, but beginning with the second movie, Smith is no longer part of the machines' hegemony. He's gone rogue and his powers grow to the extent the machines can no longer control him. Neo must then fight Smith to save both humanity and the machines. Here, Smith's evolution mirrors a concern found in *The Social Dilemma*, where digital platforms have taken on a life of their own. The climactic battle between Neo and Smith is symbolic of what happens when technology goes unchecked. On one level, Neo is fighting for humanity, as the machine army pauses its final assault on Zion while Neo enters the Matrix to battle Smith one final time. On another level, Neo is fighting for everything. If he loses, the machines will destroy Zion, but eventually the machine world will be destroyed by Smith as well. Neo defeats Smith and peace ensues, but read this way, the final confrontation is as much a warning about the unchecked dangers of technology as it is a victory for human agency. The sci-fi scenes that accompany Ben's sections in *The Social Dilemma* don't seem nearly so odd with this in mind, as they tap into what's truly scary about computer algorithms: they can think. In returning once again to the teleologic nature of fear, the *Matrix* movies present a picture of the evolution of technology on two separate planes. The first, is the more overt story of the

human/machine conflict. The second though, in the form of Smith, involves a warning about how “smart” forms of technology can literally take on a life of their own and grow far more dangerous than any of its creators ever imagined.

Both *The Terminator* and *Matrix* franchises make clear distinctions when it comes to society’s primary antagonist, and in doing so, difficult questions regarding society’s relationship with technology get pushed to the side. The evil lies in the manifestation of technology that Neo and the Connors must fight, not in the societies that created them. While both series briefly reference what brought about these conflicts, this is done only in passing. In *The Matrix*, after showing Neo what the real world looks like, Morpheus acknowledges it was the hubris of mankind creating AI that led to war. In *Terminator: Genisys*, as John Connor walks his mother and Reese out of the hospital (at this point we don’t know John Connor has been turned into a cyborg), he says, “Plugged in, logged on all the time. They can’t live without it.” He continues moments later in saying, “These people are inviting their own extinction in through the front door, and they don’t even know it.” These brief acknowledgments of the human component of technological evolution occur, but they are little more than side notes in the overall plots, plots that make it clear the greatest opposition to humanity is a manifestation of technology. Similarly, *The Social Dilemma* briefly mentions the role of unchecked capitalism (the documentary subjects left due to ethical concerns about business practices) and a lack of government regulation, but those moments too, are lost in a wealth of scare tactics that focus on what those businesses created.

Even when these fictional moments of self-realization happen, they carry an implicit argument that those who immersed themselves in technology were betraying what it meant to be

human. This is built upon the real/digital binary that argues people can't choose both. The reality is people spend large amounts of their time online and have meaningful relationships that are carried out in a variety of ways across both in-person and digital interactions. This is ignored in light-hearted texts like *40-year-old Virgin* and *The Big Bang Theory*, where it's funny to laugh at a middle-aged man who collects action figures instead of having sex or a beautiful woman who turns into a slob because she wants a new sword for her *Age of Conan* character. Those texts present Sitzer and Penny as aberrant because they've chosen behaviors distinctly different from what people are supposed to do. One of the early villains in the *Matrix* is a resistance fighter named Cypher. He strikes a deal with Agent Smith, in which in exchange for being reinserted into the Matrix, he'll give up the crew. After years of a dark and dreary existence, Cypher longs for the pleasures of the virtual world, fake as they may be. Here, not only does Cypher betray his crew, but he also betrays humanity in choosing a virtual world over a real one. Together, these different cultural narratives create fear by insisting people must choose one or the other: either a real life or a digital (fake and inferior) one. Furthermore, the consequences of choosing the latter (as society seems to have done) are dire.

### A More Intelligent Form of Digital Fear

Journalism and academic writing that focus on society's shift towards a digitally mediated lifestyle remind people their lives are in danger. These genres utilize the real/digital binary through language that makes a clear distinction between the two realms, reaffirming society is undergoing a concerning shift towards the latter. Authors routinely frame social media use as a discrete, additive component of 21<sup>st</sup> century American life as well, which in turn emphasizes the then/now binary (things were better prior to these devices).

Written discourse often proves difficult to analyze because authors frequently make solid points about evolving media landscapes, and given the ingrained nature of the real/digital binary, it's easy to skip past their problematic components. For example, in writing for the *American Journal of Public Health*, Lorien C. Abroms argues that “[g]iven the high and constant levels of use, these social media platforms must be acknowledged as central forces in people’s lives.”<sup>99</sup> Abroms is actively writing against the real/digital binary by arguing public health officials need incorporate social media use into their research. Digital platforms are part of the built environment, and thus, scholars would be remiss to ignore them. Despite calling for a more holistic approach though, Abroms still cites other scholars who make clear distinctions between “real” activities and things like Facebook. For example, in striking a cautionary tone early on, she writes, “one longitudinal study found that Facebook use over time was associated with declines in self-reported physical and mental health.”<sup>100</sup> The article she references here, written by Holly B. Shakya and Nicholas A. Christakis clearly delineates between real (good) and digital (bad) activities.<sup>101</sup> This article uses the descriptor “real-world” in opposition to Facebook interactions repeatedly, like they do near the end, in arguing, “Large quantities of social media interaction may indeed detract from more meaningful real life experiences.”<sup>102</sup> In the concluding

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<sup>99</sup> Lorien C. Abroms, “Public Health in the Era of Social Media,” *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. S2 (2019): pp. S130-S131, S131.

<sup>100</sup> Abroms, S130.

<sup>101</sup> Holly B. Shakya and Nicholas A. Christakis, “Association of Facebook Use with Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 185, no. 3 (2017): pp. 203-211.

<sup>102</sup> Shakya and Nicholas, 210.

section of their article, they use this term eleven times, all in a similar manner, insinuating Facebook use is some sort of fake and lesser activity. Social media, for Shakya and Christakis – and they are not alone by any stretch of the imagination – does not count as real. Abrams makes no mention of any of this, and indeed, the scholarship of Shakya and Christakis works its way into more mainstream circles because its argument in favor of a real/digital binary is so appealing.

While Shakya and Christakis don't say Facebook makes people depressed, they do use a type of binary language that could contribute to depression. For example, the cultural belief that certain components of today's world aren't "real" is at play in *40-Year-Old Virgin*, and "The Barbarian Sublimation," where audiences laugh at people who are (or become) losers through immersion in digital spaces. In academic research, this contributes to troubling results (like Shakya and Christakis's work) where people who spend large portions of their time online have internalized the beliefs found in many different cultural narratives that views them as social outcasts.

John Lanchester references Shakya and Christakis's research towards the end of his 2017 "You Are the Product" article for *The London Review of Books*, and he too reduces the specifics of the study until it fits it into a narrative focused on how social media (as an additive component) causes problems. Lanchester begins by noting a recent Facebook report that two billion people had used their platform in the last month and says, "No human enterprise, no new technology or utility or service, has ever been adopted so widely so quickly. The speed of uptake far exceeds that the internet itself, let alone ancient technologies such as television or cinema or

radio.”<sup>103</sup> Later, Lanchester quotes Skakya and Christakis when he writes: “[they] take the trouble to make it clear that this is a correlation rather than a definite causal relationship, but they did go so far – unusually far – as to say that the data ‘suggests a possible trade-off between offline and online relationships.’” However, immediately following this sentence, in which he acknowledges the researchers made it clear their study found a correlation not a causation, Lanchester says, “To sum up: there is a lot of research showing that Facebook makes people feel like shit.” He’s literally just cited an article and explained how this specific study didn’t find causation, but then goes on to say the research shows Facebook causes problems.

Lanchester’s ending exemplifies the teleological underpinnings of this fear of technology in playing to that paradoxical, clearly visible fear of the unknown. On Facebook’s growing power, he draws to a close by saying:

We don’t know where this is going, we don’t know what the social costs and consequences will be, we don’t know what will be the next area of life to be hollowed out, the next business model to be destroyed, the next company to go the way of Polaroid or the next business to go the way of journalism or the next set of tools and techniques to become available to the people who used Facebook to manipulate the elections of 2016. We just don’t know what’s next, but we know it’s likely to be consequential, and that a big part will be played by the world’s biggest social network. On the evidence of Facebook’s actions so far, it’s impossible to face this prospect without unease.

This fear discourse has powerful narratives everywhere that skew the sense of the unknown towards something dangerous. Cultural narratives found in film feature futuristic civilizations caught in dire struggles against manifestations of tech. More “believable” narratives like *The Big*

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<sup>103</sup> John Lanchester, “You Are the Product,” London Review of Books (London Review of Books, August 17, 2017), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n16/john-lanchester/you-are-the-product>.

*Bang Theory* and *40-Year-Old Virgin*, focus on how immersion in technology is inferior to “real world” interactions. Academic articles present troubling findings indicating social media is causing dangerous changes in behavior. And thus, articles like Lanchester’s don’t need to reference specifics because the country is already so familiar with this fear. There’s ample evidence that allows his readership to fill in the blanks about where we’re headed.

Lanchester’s final paragraph sounds good because of this, but it doesn’t hold up when placed under scrutiny. In speaking to the social costs, he insinuates social media causes the troubling reports (like the academic work he cites), yet it’s not nearly that clear. Richards et al argue that when it comes to the benefits and dangers of digital spaces, “We believe the key determinant of its effect is the nature of the young person.”<sup>104</sup> Understanding “the nature of a young person” is a hugely complicated matter, but it’s easier for Lanchester to point the finger at a media platform than it is to examine how people come to be the way they are. His comment about life being hollowed out rings of the populist backwards-looking then/now binary too. Business companies and their models are destroyed all the time, and while I can’t predict the future either, I’m comfortable in saying that in thirty years, Facebook’s business model (as we know it today) will be unrecognizable. I’ll talk about the sanctity of elections momentarily, but we should remember practices like targeted campaigning and gerrymandering are both accepted and legal ways to manipulate political races. My point is not to dismiss the concerns of how social media affects the US’s political landscape; it’s to point out American politics has always been a contested and messy arena. Even if we acknowledge Lanchester is referencing the trolls

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<sup>104</sup> Richards, Caldwell, and Go, “Impact of Social Media,” 1154.

and fake news articles that circulated on social media platforms in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election, a more pressing concern is why people believed that nonsense. Initially though, everything Lanchester's closing paragraph sounds damning because this type of technological fear is so ingrained in US cultural discussions. But all he does is argue the most obvious (no one can see the future), and it appears terrifying because it's done amidst a scary, established backdrop where the future is bleak.

Not all articles pander to fear as overtly as Lanchester or use clear binary language like Skakya and Christakis, but researchers inevitably find themselves mired in a correlative/causal mess that can't be escaped given the ubiquity of these real(good) vs digital(bad) tropes. For example, Twenge, Martin, and Campbell orient their analysis around "nonscreen" and "screen" activities.<sup>105</sup> This is an improvement in language, but the prevalence of offline=good/online=bad discourse still infects their categorization. When they write, "the least happy adolescents were those low in in-person social interaction and high in electronic communication, and the happiest were those high in in-person social interaction and low in electronic communication,"<sup>106</sup> there's no way to know how much of this comes from screen activities being inherently bad and how much stems from those kids internalizing the ideas found throughout US culture. Kross et al acknowledge this shortcoming unintentionally in arguing that not all solitary activities (like for instance, exercising) negatively affect well-being: "supporting this view, a number of recent

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<sup>105</sup> Jean M. Twenge, Gabrielle N. Martin, and W. Keith Campbell, "Decreases in Psychological Well-Being among American Adolescents after 2012 and Links to Screen Time during the Rise of Smartphone Technology.," *Emotion* 18, no. 6 (2018): pp. 765-780, 765.

<sup>106</sup> Twenge, Martin, and Campbell, 774.

studies indicate that people’s *perceptions* of social isolation (i.e., how lonely they feel) – a variable that we assessed in this study, which did not influence our results – are a more powerful determinant of well-being than *objective* social isolation.”<sup>107</sup> A variety of scholars have taken up this very topic in arguing that far sweeping societal paradigms cause people to view constructed identities as innate and defining. Here, the language of academic writing (like the plots and characterization of entertainment narratives) treats the online as problematic and a mark of social inadequacy, which in turn causes those thought patterns to play out in actual lived experiences.

Without invoking some variation of “they just need in-person contact” or relying on extreme examples, it becomes difficult to explain why online interactions are inferior. Yes, relationships are important, and humans are social creatures that require human companionship.

The first two sentences of the Shakya and Christakis article emphasizes this:

There is a considerable body of research that has demonstrated the importance of social interactions for human wellbeing. There have been thousands of studies in which researchers have investigated social support and its related constructs, and for the most part, the results have shown that human beings thrive when they have strong positive relationships with other human beings.<sup>108</sup>

I am not saying people don’t need in-person interaction. I’m saying the logic that defines “real” and “digital” interaction is arbitrary and a product of the larger discourse that looks to a new form of mediation as bad just because. For example, Kross et al. include a small distinction in their methodology that calls attention to this: “interacting with other people ‘directly’ was

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<sup>107</sup> Ethan Kross et al., “Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults,” *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 8 (2013): pp. 1-6, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Shakya and Christakis, “Association of Facebook Use,” 203.

defined as face-to-face or phone interactions.”<sup>109</sup> A phone interaction isn’t much different than a social-media interaction, yet it’s categorized along with in-person interactions and set apart from digital exchanges. This epitomizes one of a fear of technology’s central arguments, in that technologically mediated experiences – that are new – are more dangerous than existing forms because they’re new. This affects scholarship, in that it directs researchers to begin from a standpoint that assumes a new technology is problematic, and it affects their findings in that whoever they select as a sample population has internalized this same mentality because it’s found in so many different cultural arenas.

### Do I Really Need To Be Smarter Than A 5<sup>th</sup> Grader?

A fear of technology has grown powerful enough that it obscures pressing issues concerning our democracy and education. At the outset, we need to remember that both democracy and education are not static entities, but continually evolving public arenas. While social media is an incredibly powerful tool and should be incorporated into a variety of scholarship across the disciplines, much academic and popular writing approaches this topic with the eschatological component of the digital effacing the real looming large. Paul Lewis’s 2017 *Guardian* article, titled, “‘Our Minds Can be Hijacked’: the Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia,” embodies all the components of this particular fear discourse. He invokes both a dystopic vision of the world and a contentious political figure from the outset: “Drawing a straight line between addiction to social media and political earthquakes like Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump, [tech insiders] contend that digital forces have completely upended the

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<sup>109</sup> Kross et al., “Facebook Use Predicts Declines,” 2.

political system and, left unchecked, could even render democracy as we know it obsolete.”<sup>110</sup>

This impending democratic demise features prominently throughout and is emphasized best in a lengthy passage about Tristan Harris (who is featured throughout *The Social Dilemma*), one of the tech insiders who is now warning of the coming disaster.

A graduate of Stanford University, Harris studied under B.J. Fogg, a behavioral psychologist revered in tech circles for mastering the ways technological design can be used to persuade people. Harris is the student who went rogue, lifting the curtain on the vast powers accumulated by tech companies and the ways they are using that influence... ‘I don’t know a more urgent problem than this,’ Harris says. ‘It’s changing our democracy, and it’s changing our ability to have conversations and relationships that we want with each other.’

In introducing Harris, Lewis checks all the necessary boxes for a convincing American appeal to ethos. Ivy-league educated. Studied under a revered psychologist. Became disillusioned at the nefarious workings of big businesses. Quit because it’s changing our democracy. And he has now taken it upon himself, at what is likely a great personal financial cost, to do his civic duty and let the world know. If ever there were a figure deserving of our attention, the article screams, it’s Harris. After all, he’s an insider and concerned about the state of that most-sanctified of American ideals, democracy.

But which democracy?

We need remember that democracy in America is hardly static, and that is a good thing. For most of the country’s existence, federal and state authorities and institutions actively worked to exclude segments of the country from experiencing democracy. It’s been one hundred years

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Lewis, “Our Minds Can Be Hijacked’: The Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, October 6, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia>.

since women earned the right to vote, and while the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment might seem like ancient history to some, there are still people alive today who were integral in passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And still, on average, only half the eligible voters participate in presidential elections and even fewer bother with local and state races. This says nothing of how access to polling places varies greatly based on economic and racial factors. Furthermore, our current form of democracy sees almost all political coverage and debate oriented around which side will win and lose (or has just won or lost) at the expense of any mention of actual policy and its ramifications. Is this the democracy Harris and Lewis are concerned with? Doubtful. Instead, they're citing a warm, fuzzy, grade-school notion of democracy that ignores the reality of the US's existence because thinking about those things requires us to examine some awfully uncomfortable truths about our country. Perhaps the nature of US democracy, while a convenient thing to feign outrage over every election cycle, is something we should be thinking about changing (it's been changed quite a lot in the past anyways). Or at the very least, we should stop with the façade it's the most important thing in our lives because there's ample evidence it simply isn't. All of these things go by the wayside when authors like Lewis and documentarians like Orłowski start singling out social media as being responsible for democratic demise though.

Lewis writes this article in 2017, so it's worth noting that he, and likely his audience, are thinking of the spate of fake-news articles that circulated throughout Facebook during the 2016 election. Lewis isn't necessarily talking about democracy in the abstract sense as much as he is examining its manipulation by outside forces during a very specific and contentious campaign. However, a more concerning element – one that is lost in the outrage over the allegedly perilous state of our democracy – is how people were duped into believing the trash that circulated. In the

post-2016 election landscape, there were numerous articles about how spurious news stories and Russian trolls circulated on new media platforms, but very little addressing why people believed those things in the first place. This is the fundamental concern that is worrisome for a democracy, but it goes ignored in favor of easier criticism directed towards digital spaces.

If people aren't willing to get fired up about democracy being under attack, Lewis invokes education, another equally sanctified American institution that's in danger. Lewis notes these reformed technocrats choose schools less dependent on technology: "It is revealing that many of these younger technologists are weaning themselves off their own products, sending their children to elite Silicon Valley schools where iPhones, iPads and even laptops are banned." His argument, though he stops short of explicitly saying it, is that students don't learn as well with iPhones and iPads. Our society is in danger of producing citizens incapable of thinking because they've grown so dependent on technology, reminiscent of the obese humans in Disney's *Wall-E* who can no longer function. But this glosses over the fact that measuring learning is far from a settled topic. That a definitive best way to teach, assess, and learn exists is not at all accurate, yet Lewis's statement assumes this, in effectively arguing that now, courtesy of technologically-mediated schools, students don't learn as well as they did then. Furthermore, we should be concerned these individuals have the means and opportunity to send their children to "elite" schools when that is not an option available to the majority of the country.

While not written in response to Lewis's article, in *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, Adam Alter brings up the questionable integrity of claims like Lewis's:

Why shouldn't kids be allowed to play with interactive tech for hours at a time? And why, as I mentioned in the book's prologue, do so many tech experts prohibit

their children from using the very devices they design and promote in public? The truth is that we won't know how children will respond to tech overuse for some years still. The first generation of native iPhone users is only eight or nine years old, and the first generation of native iPad users is six or seven. They haven't reached their teens, so there's no way to know just how different they are from their peers who are just a couple of years older. But we do know what to look for. Tech subsumes some very basic mental activities that were once universal. Kids of the 1990s and earlier stored dozens of phone numbers in their heads; they interacted with each other rather than with devices; and they made their own fun instead of extracting manufactured fun from ninety-nine cent apps.<sup>111</sup>

Alter points out a major flaw in the discourse of technology, in that there's not a comparable point in time, so effectively people assume what is happening now is problematic just...because. Still though, Alter falls into some of those same binary traps that simply assume the then was superior to the now. It would be ridiculous to say we should give up smartphones because kids don't remember phone numbers anymore, yet that's what Alter implies. Shortly after making this argument, he goes on to mention two surveys, involving thousands of U.S. and European adults, in which "the majority said they would search online for answers to questions before trying to generate the answer from memory."<sup>112</sup> On the surface, his concern about rote memory being displaced with things like Google and smartphones sounds concerning. This doesn't make any actual sense though, because if it were true, we would be forced into a position of acknowledging the veracity of the following ridiculous statement: children in the 1890s were markedly inferior to children in the 1990s because 19<sup>th</sup>-century kids didn't have access to catalogues of phone numbers. While this is a small detail in a large analysis, it draws out an uncomfortable thought about how we view knowledge. Our conception of knowledge (as being able to recall facts and

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<sup>111</sup> Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping US Hooked* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2018), 240-241.

<sup>112</sup> Alter, 242.

information) hasn't been able to keep up with the changing technological/digital landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

An early 2000s TV gameshow unintentionally illustrates how technology has rendered our conceptions of knowledge obsolete. In 2007, Fox premiered a unique take on the quiz show in the form of *Are You Smarter than a 5<sup>th</sup> Grader*. It ran for roughly five years, and the format was straightforward. Adult contestants received a series of questions pulled from 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade textbooks, and should they get all five questions right, they could win thousands of dollars. Accompanying them were actual grade-school children who also answered the questions, and contestants could do things like peek at a child's answer. It was entertaining to watch adults who, for all intents and purposes, seemed to be successful in their daily lives fail in answering simple questions. But look a little deeper, and we have to ask how useful that textbook information is, if, as I assume was the case, most people watching the show didn't know the answers either but were still functioning members of society. Certainly, the scaffolding nature of education is important, in that people don't begin with trigonometry and extensive research papers. They must start with substantially easier content that allows them to later focus on much more complex issues. This is what Alter's survey anecdote misses though: it's what people do with the information once they have it that matters, not their ability to recall it from memory. When Lewis brings up technologists opting for different schools, instead of groaning at the thought of a US education system replete with gadgetry, we should be concerned by the very fact those gadgets might render large parts of the established education system obsolete.

One of the most profound technological evolutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that smartphones provide an unlimited access to information, and thus the ability to recall information mentally is

of limited value. I am not suggesting that when it comes to thinking we, as a society, should hand over the reins to our smartphones, but these devices should inform how we think about something as basic as knowledge. Misinformation plagues every current public conversation in the US, and seldom is it a question of statements being outright wrong. Usually, misinformation is a product of facts being out of place or presented in a skewed manner. There are certainly exceptions, like in 2017 when Kellyanne Conway coined the phrase “alternative facts” for demonstrably false statements regarding the attendance numbers of Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony. The ridicule directed towards her and that phrase was well founded, but this is the exception that proves the rule. While written nearly forty years ago, Edward Said’s *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, offers guidance for how we should approach information in the digital age:

This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation...For interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretations take place.<sup>113</sup>

It’s possible to quibble with Said’s indictment of the almighty fact, but his larger point, that it’s what people do with facts that’s important, rings truer today than ever before.

In thinking about Lewis and Lanchester’s concerns over digital spaces altering democracy, we should be focusing not just on how misinformation circulates in online spaces, but why people believe those news stories. At a biological level, people are susceptible to misinformation when they’re afraid and/or stressed, as the cognitive parts of the brain don’t work as much in those situations. At a societal level, a preponderance of different fear narratives

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<sup>113</sup> Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Revised (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 162.

ensures this is usually the case. On a more pragmatic level though, media platforms are hardly static entities, so focusing on the medium isn't a viable long-term solution. Misinformation would not go away if Twitter did. It would simply pop up on the next version. Twitter and Facebook will almost assuredly go the way of platforms like AOL and Myspace, but those underlying issues that contribute to toxic environments will factor into the next iteration of digital spaces.

The greatest danger in a fear discourse centered squarely on technology and utilizing real/digital and then/now binary language is that it sections off digital platforms as not being a part of real life. Narratives that place the blame for society's ills at the feet of social media create the illusion those problems would disappear if the medium did. This is flawed in and of itself, but this thinking also causes people to reflect on a more troubling notion, that they have limited control over major parts of their lives. Not only are we headed in a dangerous direction (where the digital will grow to replace the real), we're incapable of stopping our dependence on things like the smartphones that are causing all these issues. Thus, we arrive in a situation where a variety of academic and nonacademic texts, masquerading as warnings, act as a source of chronic stress while simultaneously ignoring (and sometimes preventing) more difficult conversations and their resolutions.

## OVERTLY HIDDEN TERROR

While the specifics vary, for the last twenty years, a fear of terrorism – and its connection to Muslims/Arabs/Middle East – has been one of the few nonpartisan components of the American cultural and political landscape. George W. Bush in constructing the War on terror in the wake of 9/11, Barack Obama in continuing drone strikes throughout the Middle East, and Donald Trump in utilizing the specter of Muslim violence to call for an immigration ban. So too does Islamophobia factor into media coverage. Mass acts of violence like the Las Vegas shooting garner substantive coverage, but it's events like the Boston Marathon bombing that drive national cultural discussions by emphasizing the danger of Islam. In covering these events, journalists who focus on the radicalization process imply society missed warning signs that could have prevented violence. Mixed in with politics and journalism is a film genre that centers on US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and offers a "real" representation of the difficulty US forces face in identifying and stopping terrorism. Movies like *Jarhead* (2005), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018) have become staples of 21<sup>st</sup> century American cinema. While predominately set overseas, these movies highlight the danger Americans face, as the films' various protagonists battle terrorists that could eventually end up on American shores. If that were to happen, the country would have little hope for safety, given the American heroes, with the entirety of the military industrial complex behind them, often fail to prevent terror attacks.

Due to its ubiquity, Islamophobia overshadows pressing societal issues, like the growing threat of right-wing terrorism, but it also illustrates that the fears of certain people vastly

outweigh the fears of others. In examining the “politics of representation,” Melani McAlister writes cultural products “helped to make the Middle East an acceptable area for the exercise of American power. Second, they played a role in representing the Middle East as a stage for the production of American identities – national, racial, and religious.”<sup>114</sup> McAlister argues that mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century texts established the Middle East as a place of importance for American interests, but I would add that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a shift and the cultural products in circulation now emphasize the danger the American body is in. The Middle East is still an area where American power is necessary, but it’s because of the danger Islam poses to the US.

This fear features prominently in 21<sup>st</sup> century life because it taps into a very basic human drive, in self-preservation. It’s one thing to get fired up about relationships being cheapened due to a preponderance of digital spaces, but it’s another thing entirely when people are told, through myriad texts, they are in danger of being killed or maimed. A fear of technology, while powerful, involves cultural values being under attack, whereas this fear discourse sees the actual human body being assaulted. The power that accompanies fears tied to self-preservation is best illustrated by examining a common childhood fear, darkness. Most adults would scoff at being afraid of the dark, despite almost certainly falling victim to it at a younger age. This is a product of thousands of years of human evolution where the species was at a disadvantage during the night: many predators had far superior senses when night fell. Being afraid of the dark, and staying close to a fire or amongst other humans, helped keep people alive. To return to the terminology of chapter one, this fear is a wired component of the brain, in that young children

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<sup>114</sup> McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 3.

fear the dark because it's been ingrained into their physiology. Despite being wired though, it's not permanent, which is why this fear eventually (for most people) disappears. Over time, children actively learn there isn't anything scary about being in a dark bedroom. This process illustrates fear extinction and demonstrates how drives that are tied to self-preservation are incredibly powerful, remaining long after they're necessary. Despite this, these same drives can be overcome through actively learning something isn't dangerous. Both elements are instructive for examining Islamophobia, which taps into this same physiology. A major Hollywood film, a presidential-campaign speech, and a *Rolling Stone* article can all tell very different stories yet contain the same cultural logic in which American bodies are in grave physical danger. The ubiquity of these narratives ensures the specter of Islamic violence is never far from the public's mind, ensuring this fear never goes extinct.

### American Islamophobia

Islamophobia ebbs and flows in accordance with world and US events, but it would be difficult to find a year in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where terrorism wasn't an important component of US culture. The US's military and political involvement in the Middle East extends back into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but a fear of Muslim terrorism came to prominence in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Islamic extremists hijacked US airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC, killing almost three thousand people. Shortly thereafter, the US invaded Afghanistan in search of the plan's mastermind, Osama Bin Ladin. Later, the US invaded Iraq under the dubious premise that Saddam Hussein was secretly developing weapons of mass destruction. These events were the genesis for the War on Terror that would define, in large part, the US's foreign and domestic

policy for subsequent years. While people rightly view the George W. Bush administration as the architect of this conflict, its concerns and goals have carried over into the following administrations.

Barrack Obama sought to set himself apart from the War on Terror early in his presidency, but his foreign policy decisions mirrored those of his predecessor. In June of 2009, the newly-inaugurated president travelled to Egypt where he delivered a speech titled “A New Beginning” at the University of Cairo. Obama explained his new Middle Eastern policy in saying, “I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition.”<sup>115</sup> But despite this language, the War on Terror’s machinery continued. The legally dubious policy of drone strikes on sovereign nations not only continued but increased under Obama.<sup>116</sup> The Guantanamo Bay Detention Center remained open, though it did drastically reduce its prisoner count. Both contradictions provide insight into how fear permeates across the political spectrum. The US repeatedly violated the sovereignty of nations but did so with the approval of its constituency because those breaches were perceived as necessary to protect Americans. So too did Gitmo violate the country’s own constitution in holding prisoners without charges or trials,

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<sup>115</sup> Barrack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, June 4, 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

<sup>116</sup> Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 107.

but once again, this was perceived as necessary given its prisoners (alleged terrorists) were too dangerous to be imprisoned in the US and/or tried in US courts. Writing for *The Cairo Review* at the end of Obama's second term, journalist Hisham Melhem pointed out the conflicted nature of the president's eight years: "Historians in the future may differ in their assessments of the extent of Obama's culpability in the region's calamities, but he will not escape the harsh judgment that his actions and inactions contributed significantly to the great unraveling in the Middle East."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Arun Kundnani argues that "Neoconservatives invented the terror war, but Obama liberalism normalized it, at which point, mainstream journalists stopped asking questions."<sup>118</sup> While Obama faced an unheard-of level of GOP resistance to his policies, in the end, his administration illustrates how a fear of Muslims persists throughout politics, regardless of partisan affiliation.

Edward Said's oeuvre revolved around representations of Islam in western culture, and while he came to prominence as a scholar forty years ago, the issues he focused on continue to play a role in the US. His 1978 *Orientalism* set the framework for how future scholars would examine representations of the Middle East. Classic Orientalism, for Said, involved established, almost exclusively male, intellectuals (be they academics, artists, bureaucrats, public figures, etc.) who viewed Eastern cultures in a binary way that set off the "West" as superior in virtually every way. Western knowledge regarding the East, from an epistemological standpoint, was

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<sup>117</sup> Hisham Melhem, "Obama's Tarnished Legacy in the Middle East," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* (The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, March 13, 2016), <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/obamas-tarnished-legacy-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>118</sup> Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), 7.

based on flawed notions of an inferior Other that were often rooted in imperialist thinking. In effect, Said was concerned with how intellectuals constructed knowledge, and while there will always be exceptions, for the most part, the correctives he offered throughout his career seem to have taken root in academia. My analysis of Islamophobia is very Saidian in nature: where Said looked for how orientalist logic circulated throughout Western culture, I focus on how fear-based cultural logics circulate throughout a variety of American mediums, and in turn, how those logics create and perpetuate Islamophobic discourse.

Said's subsequent work helps alert us for how a specific type of bodily fear regarding Muslim terrorism circulates throughout 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said focused primarily on 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature in examining how imperialist thinking infected those works. These texts, in very subtle ways, included things like the natural existence of subjugator and subjugated races and spaces. While Charles Dickens and his contemporaries didn't set out to include pro-Britain/anti-Indian components in their stories, as a product of an imperialist age, those ideas inevitably wound up in their writings.<sup>119</sup> Said offers a close reading of Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* that centers on how the Bertram family's Antigua plantation is "necessary for the poise and beauty of Mansfield Park."<sup>120</sup> Imperialism allows the plot to function as it does, as Said notes in writing, "Jane Austen sees the legitimacy of Sir Thomas Bertram's overseas properties as a natural extension of the calm, the order, the beauties of Mansfield Park, one central estate validating the economically supportive role of the

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<sup>119</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), xiv.

<sup>120</sup> Said, 59.

peripheral other.”<sup>121</sup> Readers never see the actual plantation as it’s simply a part of early 19<sup>th</sup> century life. It’s nondescript in the truest sense of the word, and particularly nefarious because details like this have historically escaped notice thanks to their banality. It’s these types of omissions that, for Said, contributed to various imperialist projects throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century: “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism.”<sup>122</sup> Culture is part of imperialism, and imperialism is part of culture, and it’s this relationship that has been absent from literary scholarship.

In both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said has a two-part criticism about texts and their cultural import that I extend to my analysis of fear. *Orientalism* focused on the way binary thinking was present throughout myriad texts that intellectuals then drew from in their work. *Culture and Imperialism* examined how imperialist ideology infected cultural texts, which then in turn provided ammunition for those countries to imperialize other spaces. In both cases, Said was critical of how certain tropes functioned throughout culture and how people then made use of those ideas, often without fully recognizing what was happening. My analysis of Islamophobia follows a similar pattern, in that I examine how a fear of bodily harm circulates throughout various cultural arenas. Like imperialism was the backdrop for the 19<sup>th</sup> century writing Said examined, fear is the backdrop for 21<sup>st</sup> century American society. For example, in the wake of Trump’s initial call to ban Muslims from entering the country there was almost universal condemnation of his comments, but there was little conversation about why the

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<sup>121</sup> Said, 79.

<sup>122</sup> Said, xiii.

comments were problematic. They were just bad things Trump shouldn't have said. Seriously examining the basis for those comments would force people to recognize a lot of American culture includes very similar components.

American Islamophobia features a cultural logic in which all Muslims are potential terrorists, and thus American society need be constantly on edge. This logic circulates throughout a variety of media, ensuring the specter of Islamic terror is never far from the public's mind. In a December 2015 rally for then-candidate Donald Trump, he laid out the beginnings of what would later become his contentious travel ban, predicated on the notion the American body is in grave danger. At a campaign stop in South Carolina, at which point Trump was no longer the fringe candidate he had been earlier, he invoked a fear of Muslim terrorists as invisible to detection: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on. We have no choice. We have no choice. We have no choice."<sup>123</sup> Citing US congresspeople as being uninformed ties into the types of identity-based tropes found throughout film, as here, the figures responsible for policy decisions meant to keep the country safe are ineffective. So too does the "based on a true story" (BOTS) genre of 21<sup>st</sup> century American war films contribute in a similar manner in visually representing how difficult it is to stop terrorism. *Zero Dark Thirty*

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<sup>123</sup>Donald Trump, "Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Rally in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina," C-SPAN (National Cable Satellite Corporation, December 7, 2015), <http://www.c-span.org/video/?401762-1%2Fpresidential-candidate-donald-trump-rally-mount-pleasant-south-carolina>. Context does matter here, in that less than a week earlier, San Bernardino CA suffered a terror attack at the hands of a married couple, one of whom was a US-born citizen of Pakistani descent, and the other a lawful permanent US resident from Pakistan.

(2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016), and *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018) all reference their authenticity by claiming some form of “based on a true story” in the opening credits. These films place a premium on identifying terrorists – and more importantly focus on what happens when US military and intelligence entities fail in their objective – which emphasizes these are very real concerns and not simply the product of creative minds in Hollywood.

The most politically charged film of this genre, *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* retells the story of the 2012 attack on the US embassy in Benghazi, in which US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and Foreign Service Officer Sean Smith were killed.<sup>124</sup> Michael Bay’s film follows a group of military contractors who are stationed at a nearby CIA compound and attempt to rescue the diplomats once their embassy comes under attack. Severely outnumbered, the contractors are forced to retreat, and in the process reveal the location of the CIA annex to the Libyan mob. Throughout the night they fight two separate battles against Libyan militia before being rescued in the morning. The movie ignores the political turmoil this event created in the US, but it does include the most overt claim to authenticity in beginning with “THIS IS A TRUE STORY.” Additionally, in the film’s first substantive moment of dialogue, the protagonist, Jack, converses with an old military friend who tells him, “Well this place [Libya] sucks Jack. Not only is it hot as balls, but you can’t tell the good guys from the bad guys.” The latter part of this quote epitomizes the fear in Islamophobia: the American body is in grave danger, and the people responsible for keeping the country safe, be they politicians or

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<sup>124</sup> *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*, directed by Michael Bay (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

soldiers, often fail in their responsibilities. As a result, the country needs to be hypervigilant – or fearful – of anyone who could be a potential terrorist.

The paradoxical nature of visual cues, as an indicator of danger, plays a defining role in Islamophobic discourse. Here, the US's War on Terror shares similarities with the Cold War when it comes to identifying threat. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, there were no visibly distinctive markers for who might be a Soviet sympathizer; they could look just like those sitting on the House Un-American Activities Committee. A person's physical appearance wasn't helpful in determining Americanness, so the country sought alternate tools, like loyalty oaths. At a fundamental level, the War on Terror is the same: looking to visual markers is a remarkably bad way to identify terrorists, yet, that's exactly what the country has done. In a departure from the Cold War, Islamophobia relies on a stereotypical conception of who is and who is not an American. Dubious as they were, at one point loyalty oaths were necessary to determine good Americans from bad ones, but today, Islamophobic narratives tell society it need only look at someone's outward appearance. This fear discourse then plays a cruel trick, because while the War on Terror purports to present an image of terror, it does little more than remind the country millions of people could fall into that very category.

In American Islamophobia, terrorism carries a distinct look that is open-ended and could include millions of people. Cultural anthropologist Nadine Naber alludes to this paradoxical component of looking like a terrorist in “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!’: Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11.” Naber relies on ethnographic research in the San Francisco Bay area to examine how race and racism were constructed in a post-911 world. According to Naber, while George W. Bush frequently said the

US was not at war with Islam (instead in conflict with Islamo-fascism) the reality was Arab/Muslim looking people were singled out as being potential terrorists. This is, and continues to be, a frustrating, and at times even deadly, reality of being classified as an Arab Muslim in the US:

the arbitrary, open-ended scope of the domestic ‘war on terror’ emerged through the association between a wide range of signifiers such as particular names (e.g., Mohammed), dark skin, particular forms of dress (e.g., a headscarf or a beard) and particular nations of origin (e.g., Iraq or Pakistan) as signifiers of an imagined ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ enemy.<sup>125</sup>

Islamophobia has turned “potential terrorist” into an empty signifier, which is why Naber’s subjects who experienced racialized harassment included “Arab and Pakistani Muslims, non-Arab/non-South Asian Muslims; Christians and Jews; aliens, permanent residents, and citizens; and young men in addition to teenagers and the elderly.”<sup>126</sup> Donald Trump’s travel ban was built upon the notion that it was best to keep all Muslims out of the country since it was so difficult to identify who was a terrorist and who was not, and a core component of the BOTS genre is that the experts routinely fail to identify terrorists before it’s too late. The American citizenry can find a potential source of violence almost anywhere it looks thanks to the way US society has constructed the image of a Muslim terrorist.

Naber’s point doesn’t reside in just the academic realm either, as there are very real consequences to the way terrorist identities are constructed in the public mind. A 2016 study

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<sup>125</sup> Nadine Naber, “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!’ Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11,” in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), pp. 276-304, 278.

<sup>126</sup> Naber, 287.

from the University of California – San Bernardino found a 78% uptick in hate crimes directed towards Muslims in 2015.<sup>127</sup> While the authors are hesitant to connect this to Donald Trump’s campaign, they do write upticks in hate crimes tend to follow culturally-significant events: in the wake of 9/11 “there was a record 481 anti-Muslim hate crimes, far outpacing the 2000 total of 28. Most of 2001’s anti-Muslim hate crimes occurred late in the year following the devastating 9/11 Al Qaeda terrorist attacks that killed 2996.”<sup>128</sup> Both spikes are indicative of a cultural logic that says terrorists look a certain way, but given the open-ended nature of those descriptors, millions of people fall into those categories. September 11<sup>th</sup> and Donald Trump’s campaign are not identical, but both brought to the fore concerns over Islamic extremism, and this fear was predicated on a flawed idea that terrorists can be identified by their appearance.

One of the great ironies of the War on Terror is that in a conflict centered around a very clear us vs. them dichotomy, it remains remarkably difficult to figure out who they are. Despite celebrations of multiculturalism in the US, being American still carries a certain look, and when it comes to the War on Terror, this look is decidedly non-Arab/Muslim. A series of post-9/11 public service announcements from the Ad Council sought to address this through its “I am an American” campaign, but Evelyn Alsultany argues the ads ended up reinforcing the very narrative they were trying to change. These television commercials featured about thirty people of varying ages and ethnicities, looking into a camera and stating, “I am an American.” It was supposed to highlight the inclusive nature of the US, but as Alsultany notes, “despite seeking to

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<sup>127</sup> Brian Levin, “Hate Crime in the United States: 20 State Compilation of Official Data,” ed. Kevin Grisham (UC San Bernardino, 2016), pp. 1-62, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Levin, 15.

deconstruct the binary of citizen/terrorist, Arabs, Muslims, and Sikhs are not included in this diverse display. There are no visible markers of anything Arab, Muslim, or Sikh in the ads.”<sup>129</sup>

To further the point of both Naber and Alsultany, the first revenge killing after 9/11 was not a Muslim, it was a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was shot in Arizona on September 15, 2001.<sup>130</sup>

Certainly, if this attack had been directed towards the “correct” group it would still be wrong, but it illustrates the uselessness of the visual representations American society has created for the War on Terror. It’s not that Sodhi’s killer got his visual representation wrong, it’s that the cultural logic of Islamic terror says anyone who doesn’t look “American” (an utterly useless descriptor in its own right) could be a terrorist.

### Based On A True Story

In the BOTS genre, Arab/Muslim figures receive little characterization compared to the American figures, which contributes to a powerful us vs. them dynamic. Clint Eastwood’s *The 15:17 to Paris* tells the story of Spencer Stone, Anthony Sadler, and Alek Skarlatos who stopped an attempted terror attack on a European passenger train.<sup>131</sup> Eastwood frames his narrative around flashbacks that focus on Spencer’s upbringing interspersed with scenes of the terrorist boarding the train and preparing to kill. In these flashbacks, we learn that Spencer and his best friend (Alek) come from single-parent homes and are often in trouble at school. They’re

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<sup>129</sup> Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*, 135.

<sup>130</sup> Moni Basu, “15 Years after 9/11, Sikhs Still Victims of Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes,” CNN (Cable News Network, September 15, 2016), <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/us/sikh-hate-crime-victims/index.html>.

<sup>131</sup> *The 15:17 to Paris*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2018).

separated when Spencer's mom moves to another state, and while the two keep in touch, they begin to drift apart. They reconnect though by planning a vacation through Europe, which is where they encounter the terrorist. The audience becomes intimately familiarized with a character who embodies American values, juxtaposed against a flat terrorist construction. We receive no backstory of the terrorist: he boards the train, prepares to kill people, and then is overpowered by the American heroes. Furthermore, Eastwood cast the actual people (Stone, Sadler, and Skarlatos) in this film instead of actors, lending more credence to the idea this is a "real" account of terrorism, which in turn makes the protagonists more relatable as they're actual people, not actors.

In terms of this depiction of terrorism, this discrepancy defines the us (developed, relatable, heroic) vs. them (no characterization, foreign, evil) binary of the War on Terror. This characterization pattern accentuates the human brain's willingness to build fear associations with people who look different, which scientists refer as "prepared learning," the brain's penchant to build fear associations more easily with those who look and sound different.<sup>132</sup> Here, an American audience is primed to empathize with the protagonist group because they look like "Americans," and we get relatable backstory. Furthermore, in *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, Stacy Takacs argues the last forty years of American war cinema have reduced the narrative scope to individual soldiers, with the result being that "all evacuated the political contexts of war and focused instead on the intimate details of the

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<sup>132</sup> Sapolsky, *Behave*, 36.

fighting.”<sup>133</sup> As she goes on to note, this has led to films that sing the praises of individual soldiers yet leave out any of the geopolitical contexts that led to the conflict in the first place. The BOTS genre ramps this up to another level in also emphasizing these are true accounts of what has happened. Not only do we see a tight narrative scope, crafted to help us empathize with the American characters, but these are the types of experiences actually happening to our fellow citizens in the armed forces. In contrast, the terrorist’s characterization is nonexistent, he wears very different clothing, and he speaks a language that few in the US understand.

A Harvard study by social scientist Ryan Enos supports the assertion these types of representations affect how people think about cultural discussions.<sup>134</sup> Enos devised an experiment in which Boston subway riders answered a series of questions involving their views on Hispanic immigration (along with detailed information about what routes they took). Enos then recruited two Spanish speakers and placed them on subway platforms that corresponded with respondents who would receive the experiment’s treatment. The treatment itself involved the pair simply conversing in Spanish, and over the course of two time periods (3 and 10 days), respondents filled out the same survey they initially took. The results, as Enos points out, are concerning: “Treated subjects were far more likely to advocate a reduction in immigration from Mexico and were far less likely to indicate that illegal immigrants should be allowed to remain in this country.”<sup>135</sup> He goes on to note this shift was only apparent regarding Hispanic immigration,

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<sup>133</sup> Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 13.

<sup>134</sup> Enos, “Causal Effect.”

<sup>135</sup> Enos, 3701

as he asked respondents about “their perceived threat from Asian Americans, African Americans, and persons of Middle Eastern ancestry. These variables do not show a similar change.”<sup>136</sup> On a whole, Enos’s findings reflect bottom-up influencing, in that it highlights how non-conscious exposure to Themis can shape conscious decisions. The BOTS genre includes characterization that contributes to Islamophobia, and the language component of these films functions in a similar manner. An audience routinely hears foreign speakers who then are linked to terror, furthering the notion terrorism has a distinct look and sound.

BOTS movies don’t need to offer characterization of Muslim/Arab characters because there are enough references to the War on Terror throughout American culture that an audience can fill in the blanks. For example, in *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* we get a scene, prior to the initial assault on the embassy compound, where a mass of young Libyans gather, and the included subtitles read: “[MEN SHOUTING INDISTINCTLY]”. There’s no need for translation because Islamophobic discourse has established people who look and sound like this are the bad guys. Enos’s study focuses more on a type of bottom-up influencing where people are simply unaware of the influencing stimuli (not recognizing there are people speaking a foreign language on a subway platform), but it connects to this fear discourse by illustrating how just hearing a particular language can affect cultural discussions that language is connected to. In these movies, we frequently encounter mobs of agitated men speaking/yelling a language that’s unintelligible, and more often than not, they’re in some stage of attacking US forces. This

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<sup>136</sup> Enos, 3702. An interesting caveat though is that “the 10-d treatment still moves opinions in an exclusionary direction, the effects are considerably stronger after 3 d than after 10 d, perhaps indicating that repeated exposure to an outgroup can mitigate initial negative reactions.”

further fear narratives, in that it links Arabic-sounding languages to terrorism. This both builds on (and helps create) the type of situation Naber was referencing, in that anything not stereotypical American (white and English) can be a marker for terrorism.

Occasionally there are moments where these films do offer translations, but these instances further the point that Muslims/Arabs are evil. In Clint Eastwood's adaptation of the 2012 memoir *American Sniper*, the film's narrative shifts between the horrendously violent urban warfare Chris Kyle and his squad encounter (largely revolving around a fictionalized showdown between him and an Iraqi sniper named Mustafa) and a loving, but understandably-trying, marriage in the US. After defeating Mustafa and a horde of Iraqis in the film's climax, Kyle returns to the US for good, where he overcomes his PTSD by assisting other veterans. It's one of these struggling veterans who kills Kyle while at a shooting range. Overall, *American Sniper* features the same types of characterization tropes found throughout *The 15:17 to Paris*, and we get similar language components to that of *13 Hours*. There is one exception though. In the movie's most graphic scene, an Al-Qaeda character dubbed "The Butcher" uses an electric drill to murder an Iraqi child in the street, while the boy's father watches. This is done as payback, as the father had helped Kyle and coalition forces. After he kills the child, The Butcher screams "You talk to them, you die with them." Here, we do get a translation, and it drives home the point that these are evil people. There are countless interactions between characters throughout these movies, yet Arab characters, while presented, are silenced in this odd way. They speak, but the specifics are ignored. Fear extinction is the process by which people grow to realize a particular trigger shouldn't generate fear. Theoretically, substantive Arabic dialogue, in which characters simply converse, would help alleviate the type of connections I've brought up

in referencing Enos's work. However, we don't get any of that, and furthermore, when we do get translations, they're confirming the already-established fear association: Arabic-sounding language equals terrorism.

In addition to language, character dress contributes to this fear discourse in suggesting terrorism has a distinct look, and it's stereotypical Arab/Muslim garb. *The 15:17 to Paris* illustrates this from the outset, in that the opening credits feature someone on the walkway of a train station whom the audience is supposed to recognize as a terrorist. The audience never sees his face, and we don't know his identity or significance to the movie, but there are a few telling clues. He's wearing a white robe (different from a US audience). His complexion is darker, and he has a beard. He's also wearing sunglasses (inside) which we read as an attempt to obscure his identity. This description could be of any of millions of people around the world, but in the context of this fear discourse, it's clear these are visual signifiers of a terrorist. Granted, the movie's marketing made it clear what the plot was about, but that's the point of this type of fear discourse. So many narratives circulating throughout the US speak to the danger Americans (or in this case Western society) are in, that trivial details like what a person is wearing are supposed to signify terrorism.

Islamophobia relies on a visual us/them binary, but it also draws heavily upon the paradoxical notion. Them is difficult to identify, what I am calling "overtly hidden terror." Here, films construct the main antagonist group as being hard to identify, despite the overall premise of the discourse that says there are clear visual markers for terrorists. The entire plot of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is based on finding terrorists' real identities in hopes

of eliminating Osama Bin Laden.<sup>137</sup> The movie's protagonist, Maya Harris, is a CIA analyst stationed in Pakistan who is tasked with finding Bin Laden. Bigelow includes numerous scenes depicting CIA torture of suspected terrorists, and these scenes involve trying to put names to pictures of persons of interest. Eventually, due to Harris's perseverance, the CIA gets a break and identifies Bin Laden's personal courier, who takes messages to a compound outside of Abbottabad. While they never actually see Bin Laden, due to 24-hour surveillance, the CIA gathers enough evidence to convince President Obama to approve a special forces strike that is successful in killing the Al-Qaeda leader. It takes Harris and the CIA over a decade to find and eliminate Bin Laden, emphasizing the difficulty in such a task.

Not only does this film implicitly speak to the difficulty in identifying terrorists, but it also overtly references the danger these unknowable terrorists provide. This film emphasizes its status as a "real" account, in that its first words on the screen are, "The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events." Audio recordings from 9/11 play against a black screen immediately following this disclaimer to drive the point home. From the very beginning, this film combines real events its audience is aware of, with a fictionalized story emphasizing the difficulty the good guys face. In blending the real with the fictional, these movies often construct scenes that reaffirm the danger facing an American public. *Zero Dark Thirty* includes a dramatization of the 2009 Camp Chapman attack, in which a Jordanian doctor, whom intelligence officials believed had been converted from Al-Qaeda to the US, arrives at Camp Chapman under the guise of assisting in locating high-ranking Al-Qaeda officials. Instead,

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<sup>137</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (Sony Pictures, 2012).

he detonates a suicide vest, killing himself and seven US operatives. One of the film's more poignant moments is centered around this, and it sees the protagonist, Harris, devastated upon learning her friend, the CIA operative responsible for arranging this meeting, was amongst those killed. A pivotal point in the movie, this joins the fictional and the actual and creates a clear message: even the experts struggle to tell the good guys from the bad. And if they – with the entire military/intelligence community at their disposal – get things wrong and end up dying because of it, the American citizenry would be in dire straits should these terrorists arrive on US shores.

This genre of film is largely set in a very foreign land, but the implication, as part of a larger fear discourse, is this type of terror is trying to get to American soil and it's taking the combined effort of the military industrial complex to keep it at bay. In one of *American Sniper*'s few introspective moments, Chris Kyle converses with another soldier about what they're doing in Iraq. Kyle's justification is simple: "There's evil here. You've seen it." And he's right, for Eastwood ensures audiences witness Islamic evil. The conversation continues and Kyle argues that US forces are preemptively stopping terrorism from arriving on American shores. According to Kyle, the US military is the last line of defense between idyllic life in the US and the evil that permeates throughout the Arab world. Throughout these movies, different branches of the military intelligence apparatus are tasked with protecting American lives. In turn, they are all celebrated and denigrated, though no single entity is ever completely successful (illustrating the difficulty of their task). Sometimes the movies construct the CIA as being most adept, like in *Zero Dark Thirty*, but in others the CIA is utterly incompetent (*13 Hours*). In *American Sniper*, US soldiers are amazing warriors and heroes, whereas in *13 Hours*, they take a backseat to the

private military contractors. Who, specifically, represents the US in its struggle against a malevolent Islam varies, but what remains consistent is the Them's look and sound the same.

### An Ever-Present Threat

The 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing and its subsequent media coverage furthers fear narratives in implying authorities missed important warning signs. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, two improvised explosive devices detonated near the finish line, killing three people and wounding hundreds more. Over the next three days, two brothers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, were implicated in the crime, and a citywide manhunt ensued. Tamerlan was killed in a shootout with police in the early morning hours of April 19<sup>th</sup>. Dzhokhar was captured the following evening, and later tried and convicted. Subsequent journalism sought an answer for how the Tsarnaevs turned into murderers, and in attempting to answer this question, these articles furthered the notion American society failed to prevent this attack because Bostonians missed signs of the brothers' radicalization. Aside from being rare, what makes this story unique is that it was turned into a major Hollywood picture, *Patriots Day*, starring Mark Wahlberg, Kevin Bacon, and John Goodman.<sup>138</sup> The film begins with a series of shots spliced together. One set involves local Bostonians preparing to attend the city's marathon festivities, and the other features flashbacks to the Tsarnaevs researching bombs and preparing to detonate them. The film then follows Boston law enforcement as they respond to the attack and then hunt down the perpetrators. *Patriots Day* serves as a warning about what can happen if the evil of the Middle East arrives in North

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<sup>138</sup> *Patriots Day*, directed by Peter Berg (Lionsgate, 2016).

America, further amplified by the fact those closest to the Tsarnaevs had no idea what the brothers were plotting.

While not overtly military, *Patriots Day* speaks to the difficulty inherent in identifying terrorists before they commit their crimes. In the movie, once law enforcement has identified the Tsarnaev brothers as persons of interest, Special Agent Richard DesLauriers and Boston police commissioner Ed Davis fight about releasing the suspects' pictures to the public. In a heated exchange, DesLauriers argues "What if they're innocent? And God forbid, they also happen to be Muslims? We will be crucified! They don't look like prototypical jihadists to me." Davis responds by demanding, "What does a prototypical jihadist look like, Rick? You got a photo of one?" This exchange underscores how the specter of Islamic terror permeates throughout any conversation about mass acts of violence: DesLauriers is keenly aware of this and wants to avoid a situation where it seems like law enforcement wrongly focused on these two because they appeared Muslim. At the same time though, this movie ultimately reinforces this very stereotype, in that Muslims were the perpetrators. The knee-jerk reaction DesLauriers is wary of is ultimately proven to be correct.

The various texts surrounding this terrorist attack emphasize the importance of individual Americans in stopping terrorism, yet paradoxically emphasize how futile this is because attacks continue to happen. In the film, Boston area residents are integral in the city-wide manhunt that leads to the bombers being brought to justice. In the climax, law enforcement corners the younger Tsarnaev, who is hiding in a boat that has been stored on a local Bostonian's property. The FBI's hostage team takes over, and as agents climb onto surrounding roofs, two of them meet a local woman with a pistol, who tells them, "This is my spot, and I ain't fucking leaving."

One of the two agents then replies sardonically, “glad to have you with us ma’am.” This scene, along with the tips the public give to law enforcement highlight how terrorism (and vigilance) is a responsibility of all “good” Americans. Climbing atop a roof with a pistol to defend your neighborhood might be a stretch, but being vigilant when it comes to terrorism isn’t. While 9/11 was on a scale that individual Americans couldn’t prevent, subsequent Islamic terrorist attacks have been on a much smaller scale (though the three deaths from the Boston bombing are no less tragic for those involved than the almost 3000 deaths from 9/11). Thus, films like *Patriots Day* and journalism surrounding the bombing reinforce what individual people can do to prevent terrorism.

Domestic terrorist attacks and their coverage serve as an acute source of stress (or fear), but the chronic nature of Islamophobia ensures the powerful emotions those events generate can be triggered with frequency and certainty. People can “think” their way into stressful situations, like convincing themselves they’re in danger of being victims of a terrorist attack. This happens due to a plethora of cultural texts that emphasize the danger of Islamic terror, but this is done in a world in which these attacks do happen. And even worse, there appears to be no way to predict or prevent an attack. If ever there were a recipe for fear (and stress) this is it, and it’s this idea that’s instructive for understanding American cultural views on Islamic terrorism. Random, terrorist acts do happen in the US,<sup>139</sup> and while politicians and news agencies often twist these

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<sup>139</sup> A note on my choice of random. In the wake of 9/11, some communities expressed a sense of “why would anyone want to do this to us?” While there is no excuse for terrorism, this mentality ignored the US’s role in the Middle East for the previous several decades. Saying 9/11 was random borders on ignoring the US’s troubling history in the Middle East and caters to a very problematic idea that they hate us simply because they’re evil.

events for their own gain, these manipulations don't change the fact these events do occur, and people do die. Myriad narratives reference the specter of Muslim terror reaching American shores frequently enough that it is seldom out of the public sphere. When Islamic terror attacks do happen in the US, a deluge of media reports argue, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that signs of impending terrorism were missed.

By piecing together what happened, writers often imply terrorism occurred because society overlooked signs of radicalization. In *The Muslims Are Coming*, Arun Kundnani focuses on how this concept of Muslim radicalization has shaped US and European discourse. He argues Western powers have created a flawed system that views radicalization as a progressively worsening process that ends in terrorism (but only when it involves Muslims). The thinking would be that if society can catch people early in the radicalization process, it can prevent anything serious from happening. However, since there is no control group in this framework, authorities are simply looking at characteristics of terrorists and assuming their commonalities lead to terrorism, when there could be (and likely are) millions of people who take on radical religious and political beliefs yet never commit any violent acts. As Kundnani notes, "terrorism can only be prevented by systematically monitoring Muslim religious and political life and trying to detect the radicalization indicators predicted by the model."<sup>140</sup> This creates an aura in which being a patriotic American requires a state of hypervigilance, further amplified because identifying terrorists is something even authorities struggle to do.

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<sup>140</sup> Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, 12.

News coverage focusing on the Boston bombing catered to fear narratives in explaining how one of the plan's masterminds, Dzhokhar (or Jahar to his friends) seemed to be the antithesis of a terrorist. Several months after the attack, *Rolling Stone* ran a story on the younger Tsarnaev that included a controversial cover shot, and author Janet Reitman's subtitle underscores the danger American society is currently facing: "He was a charming kid with a bright future. But no one saw the pain he was hiding or the monster he would become."<sup>141</sup> The 11,000-word article revolves around the shock Jahar's circle of friends encountered upon learning he was a terrorist, and not, in fact, an American as they believed (he was a naturalized US citizen). This disbelief betrays the binary of Islamophobia, in that Jahar was clearly both, yet no one can seem to grasp that concept. Reitman begins with a former high school wrestling coach being flabbergasted at a TV image of the suspect, who looks like his former wrestler. "'I felt like a bullet went through my heart,' the coach recalls. 'to think that a kid we mentored and loved like a son could have been responsible for all this death. It was beyond shocking. It was like an alternative reality.'" The remainder of the article offers an inside look at the Tsarnaev family and the varied complexities of being a first-generation immigrant family from Chechnya. Reitman continually reminds her audience that Jahar seemed like a good kid, writing that "after several months of interviews with friends, teachers and coaches still reeling from the shock, what emerges is a portrait of a boy who glided through life, showing virtually no signs of anger, let alone radical political ideology or any kind of deeply felt religious beliefs." In the article's ending, Reitman quotes a handful of his friends who are mystified at how this could have

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<sup>141</sup> Janet Reitman, "Jahar's World," *Rolling Stone* (*Rolling Stone*, July 17, 2013), <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/jahars-world-83856/>.

happened. As she notes, “the reality is that none of Jahar’s friends had any idea he was unhappy, and they really didn’t know he had any issues in his family other than, perhaps, his parents’ divorce, which was kind of normal.” Over and over, this article makes clear those closest to Dzhokhar had no idea he was plotting this. If those closest to him couldn’t see this coming, it would appear there is little the country can do to prevent these sorts of attacks from happening in the future.

Reitman’s article includes the type of radicalization language Kundnani worried about, in that it relates a brief conversation in which Dzhokhar appeared to express sympathy for the 9/11 terrorists. Will, one of his former friends, recounted a conversation in which the younger Tsarnaev implied there was some validity to the 9/11 attacks due to the US’s continued bombings of Muslim-majority countries. This is a complex topic. After all, both things can be true: 9/11 was a horrendous terrorist attack and the US has been responsible for bloodshed throughout the Middle East for several generations. People might cringe at the use of “validity” to describe the terror attacks, but we should remember how enmeshed we are in a cultural milieu that doesn’t allow for any sort of nuanced conversation regarding the War on Terror and specifically 9/11. You are either a good American or a terrorist. Any type of analysis deeper than that, and you run the risk of somehow supporting terrorism or not supporting American troops. Reitman’s piece tries to paint a more nuanced picture of the personal and familial machinations that lead to the Boston Marathon Bombing, but even so, she’s not willing to engage with this 9/11 conversation. Instead of focusing on the implications of Jahar’s 9/11 comment, like she does in examining the rest of his background, she falls into familiar societal tropes in referencing missed clues of radicalization. She writes, “In retrospect, Jahar’s comment about 9/11 could be

seen in the context of what criminal profilers call ‘leakage’: a tiny crack in an otherwise carefully crafted façade that, if recognized – it’s often not – provides a key into the person’s interior world.” Instead of nuance about the US’s role in world affairs, she presents this anecdote as a missed sign that had dire consequences. If only Will had said something. If only the people around him had insisted on being admitted into his familial world (few of his social circle ever met any of his family or even entered his home). If only someone would have done something, they might have been able to stop the Boston bombing. In the end, Reitman seems to argue there was no way anyone could have seen this coming, but brief moments like this 9/11 section act as a disclaimer, reminding readers they need be wary of immigrants, lest some sort of attack like this happen in the future.

### Axis of Fear: Political Islamophobia

The War on Terror fear ideology works its way into a number of political conversations, often framing Islam as antithetical to America. Since his election in 2008, Barack Obama has been the subject of various conspiracy theories concerning his connection to Islam. These have been debunked numerous times, but the topic itself is worth revisiting following John McCain’s 2018 death and a video clip that began circulating thereafter.<sup>142</sup> Available in numerous places, this video features a town hall McCain, the GOP presidential nominee, held in the leadup to the 2008 election. When a woman said she couldn’t trust Obama because he was an Arab, McCain stopped her before she could continue and took the microphone back. He responded by saying,

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<sup>142</sup> Available in numerous places, this video can be found by googling “John McCain defends Obama”

“No ma’am. He’s a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign issue is all about.” While posthumously heralded as insight into the Arizona senator’s character, McCain’s response was hardly the defense it was made out to be a decade later. Had McCain taken the microphone back, said there was nothing wrong with Arabs, or being Arab, and gone on to mention Arabs are decent family men and citizens, it would be cause for celebration, but that’s not what happened. Instead, he perpetuated the notion that Arab/Muslim is mutually exclusive to that of American. He corrects her in saying that Obama isn’t an Arab. That this clip gained such prominence after his death as a moment of non-partisan integrity illustrates just how deep Islamophobia circulates in American politics. McCain was posthumously celebrated for doing the same thing the woman was: making a clear distinction between being an Arab and being American. His issue wasn’t with the underlying premise of the woman’s comment, it was that she had misattributed it.

This type of rhetoric, in which there is a clear dichotomy between American and Arab/Muslim finds its way into more official political texts, like that of George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address. While often referred to as the “Axis of Evil” speech, I would argue a more fitting name is the Axis of Fear speech, in that Bush’s speech serves as the ur-text for 21<sup>st</sup> century American Islamophobia. In speaking of Iraq, and hoping to generate support for a future invasion, the president says:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies

or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.<sup>143</sup>

The idea that Hussain and Bin Laden would work together is patently ridiculous, given that when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Bin Laden tried to raise an army to attack Hussein because he viewed the invasion as an affront to an Islamic holy site. Bush's insinuation this could happen stunk of reductionism, in that his comments imply there isn't much difference between Saddam Hussain and Osama Bin Laden. In glossing over any of these differences by citing a specter of WMDs, Bush laid out the framework for the following War on Terror and its accompanying fear discourse: everyone who looks or sounds like them could be a terrorist.

Throughout his address, President Bush utilizes a language of fear to establish the necessity of the various components of the War on Terror. Roughly three quarters of the address is devoted to concerns of national security, which given the recency of 9/11, isn't surprising. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how the new fear Bush talks about has become ingrained into American culture. For instance, in his sixth sentence Bush says that "terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay." His audience then applauds. While the full nature of Guantanamo was yet to be discovered, here, Bush preemptively argues the danger is so severe the country need look to quasi-legal means for protection. He goes on to make reference to the "true scope of the task ahead" in saying:

We have seen the depth of our enemies hatred in videos, where they laugh about the loss of innocent life. And the depth of their hatred is equaled by the madness of the destruction they design. We have found diagrams of American nuclear power plants and public water facilities, detailed instructions for making chemical

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<sup>143</sup> George W Bush, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, January 29, 2002), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html>.

weapons, surveillance maps of American cities, and thorough descriptions of landmarks in American and throughout the world.

Bush emphasizes the perilous situation the country now finds itself in by using charged words to highlight the depravity of the enemy, hatred (twice), madness, destruction, and laughing at the destruction their terrorism has brought. These are the characteristics of the enemy, and it's the type of evil Chris Kyle was referencing in *American Sniper*. This passage also focuses on the potential vulnerabilities of the country; while Bush mentions only nuclear power plants, every community has some sort of water treatment facility, meaning any location in the country is a potential target. To make matters even worse, Bush cites the potential for chemical attacks and notes terrorists are actively engaged in surveillance operations. Conceivably, they're looking for vulnerable areas, places where the public is lax in their patriotic duties to protect the country. To end this section, Bush points out that terrorism is a global issue. There's no place in the entire world that is safe from terror.

Bush also lays out the "overtly hidden terror" that circulates throughout subsequent Islamophobic discourse in citing the dispersal of terrorist agents:

What we have found in Afghanistan confirms that, far from ending there, our war against terror is only beginning. Most of the 19 men who hijacked planes on September the 11<sup>th</sup> were trained in Afghanistan's camps, and so were tens of thousands of others. Thousands of dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning.

This, and a following section, lay the groundwork for the later invasion of Iraq, but it's the numbers that matter when it comes to terrorist threat. September 11<sup>th</sup> wasn't an isolated instance, according to the president, in that there are thousands of similar terrorists out there, trying to engage in similar actions. The imagery of a "ticking time bomb" is important here too, as it ties into concerns about vigilance. Ticking time bombs aren't immune to discovery. You can find

them, but you must know what to listen for and be attentive to the possibility a bomb is in your vicinity. This ties into the language found throughout terrorism coverage, in that it's the duty of civilian populations to be aware of terrorist signs, which as Naber points out, is anything Muslim looking/sounding.

Bush points to 9/11 as having irrevocably altered the American landscape, ushering in an era of fear: "America is no longer protected by vast oceans. We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad, and increased vigilance at home." Terror can be anywhere, and US invasions of sovereign countries are now necessary to protect innocence at home. As Bush draws to a close, he says, "The last time I spoke here, I expressed the hope that life would return to normal. In some ways, it has. In others, it never will... We've come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed." Bush utilizes a language of surveillance to effectively argue life can return to normal, but only if certain conditions are met. The country must be willing to enter a state of hyper-vigilance if it is to find the thousands of ticking time bombs that have thus far escaped notice.

Obama's presidency serves as an interesting point in terms of Islamophobic discourse because the dichotomous rhetoric of the War on Terror would continue, yet it was often at the expense of the 44<sup>th</sup> president. A 2010 article by Angie Drobnic Holan for *Politifact* found that 24% of respondents for a recent *Time* article said Obama was a Muslim.<sup>144</sup> In writing a 2017 summary article of Obama's presidency for *Factcheck.org*, D'Angelo Gore begins by pointing

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<sup>144</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, "Why Do so Many People Think Obama Is a Muslim?," *Politifact* (Poynter Institute, April 26, 2010), <https://www.politifact.com/article/2010/aug/26/why-do-so-many-people-think-obama-muslim/>.

out “Perhaps no bogus claim has persisted more than the falsehood that Obama is anti-Christian Muslim” and then citing a 2015 CNN/ORC poll that found 29% of Americans believe this.<sup>145</sup>

That this was a continued issue throughout his presidency speaks to the way American society has constructed American and Muslim in mutually exclusive terms. It’s one or the other, as Islam has been deemed antithetical to being American. Obama was no pacifist when it came to Middle Eastern policy, yet his public remarks didn’t contain the same overt fear-mongering as Bush and Trump, yet his location, as the subject of Islamophobic rhetoric, ensured the fear discourse wasn’t removed from the public view (augmented by a continuous stream of BOTS movies), and made it a winning topic for Donald Trump.

The notion the American body is in grave danger, as indicated throughout Bush’s *Axis of Evil* speech, was updated at a December 2015 rally for then-candidate Donald Trump. While Trump’s speech is characteristically replete with rambling language, from the outset, he taps into fear by referencing Islamic hatred, stating “According to Pew Research, among others, there is a great hatred towards Americans by large segments of the Muslim population.” There are myriad flaws with the poll he draws statistics from, but the important thing is to think of the numbers these statistics suggest:

Most recently, a poll from Center for Security Policy released data showing 25% of those polled agreed that violence against Americans – these are people that are here by the way, people here. 25, not 1%. By the way 1% would be unacceptable. 1% is unacceptable – 25% of those polled agreed that violence against Americans, here in the United States, is justified as part – think of that – as part of the global Jihad.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> D'Angelo Gore, “Eight Years of Trolling Obama,” FactCheck.org, January 19, 2017, <https://www.factcheck.org/2017/01/eight-years-of-trolling-obama/>.

<sup>146</sup> Trump, “Presidential Candidate.”

This is no longer a question of thousands of terrorists in the US as Bush warned in 2002. Now the country is faced with a quarter of the entire Muslim population desiring jihad against Americans. This also reinforces the mutually exclusive nature of Muslim and American as well: Muslims (already in the US) are not Americans, they want to do harm to Americans. Not only do narratives found in film emphasize professionals struggle in fighting terrorism, but journalism also creates the illusion signs have been missed. Now, we add to the mix millions of Muslims who believe violence is appropriate. Trump continues in situating himself as the last line of defense against things like jihad and beheadings:

They want to change your religion. I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think so. Not gonna happen. As part of the global Jihad, and 51% of those polled agreed that Muslims in America should have the choice of being governed according to Sharia. You know what Sharia is? 51%. Sharia authorizes – and look, this is, I mean, it's terrible – Sharia authorizes such atrocities as murder against nonbelievers who won't convert. Beheadings, and more unthinkable acts that pose great harm to Americans, especially women. I mean, you look, especially women.

My point here isn't to fact-check his statement regarding jihad as much as it is to point out the numbers his rhetoric necessitates. Trump drives home the peril the Americans find themselves in by stating, “it's obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension, of such a big portion.”

Trump plays to fear in emphasizing the potential for violence by invoking the specter of 9/11 in saying “It's gonna get worse and worse. You're gonna have more World Trade Centers.” He furthers the Islam/American binary by reminding his audience “These are people, only believe in jihad. They don't want our system. They don't want our system. And have no sense of reason or respect for human life. They have no respect for human life.” Trump's four-minute Islamophobia rant is standard fare for his brand: he uses charged language, misrepresents the stats he cites, and ends by suggesting more 9/11s will happen unless he is elected. He implies American politicians have been ineffective in stopping domestic terror, and thus, the burden

shifted to individual American citizens and asked them to be vigilant of Muslims in their community. This has not been effective either, so a simple ban is the only way to prevent terror. Citing US congresspeople as being uninformed ties into the types of identity-based tropes found in the BOTS genre, as here, the figures responsible for policy decisions meant to keep the country safe are ineffective.

In using survey results, Trump presents seemingly objective evidence that supports the danger Muslims pose to the country. While Trump begins by referencing Pew Research, the poll he uses is far from an objective source. Done by the far-right Center for Security Policy, its title, “Poll of U.S. Muslims Reveals Ominous Levels of Support for Islamic Supremacists’ Doctrine of Shariah, Jihad,” is an overt attempt at fear, and it highlights how this is far from an objective analysis of Muslim attitudes.<sup>147</sup> As Jeremy Diamond of CNN wrote shortly after the rally, Trump’s comments were based on “an online poll from the controversial Center for Security Policy...critics have questioned the reliability of the organization’s information.”<sup>148</sup> The US would undoubtedly be a better place if citizens looked up survey methodology following a politician’s claims, but in this case, Trump’s supporters didn’t need to. They’ve already seen what this poll ostensibly shows: Muslims are one of, if not the, major source of threat to the

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<sup>147</sup> Center for Security Policy, “Poll of U.S. Muslims Reveals Ominous Levels of Support for Islamic Supremacists’ Doctrine of Shariah, Jihad,” Center for Security Policy, June 23, 2015, <https://centerforsecuritypolicy.org/nationwide-poll-of-us-muslims-shows-thousands-support-shariah-jihad/>.

<sup>148</sup> Jeremy Diamond, “Donald Trump: Ban All Muslim Travel to U.S. | CNN Politics,” CNN (Cable News Network, December 8, 2015), <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-immigration/index.html>.

country. Trump's Muslim ban came in a culture replete with Islamophobic tropes that remind Americans the protectors of the country routinely fail to stop extremist violence.

The two questions Trump referenced at his rally reflect the reductive reasoning characteristic of President Bush's Axis of Evil speech. Philip Bump of the *Washington Post* pointed out this was hardly a rigorous academic survey, in that it was an online, opt-in poll, had poorly worded questions, and ended with what can best be described as a sad, yet comical flaw in using this as evidence for immigration policy: "That survey is of *U.S. Muslims*. Meaning that even this already questionable survey has absolutely no relationship to the people from overseas

10. "Muslims in America should have the choice of being governed according to shariah."

|            |                             |
|------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>51%</b> | <b>TOTAL AGREE (NET)</b>    |
| 23%        | STRONGLY AGREE              |
| 28%        | SOMEWHAT AGREE              |
| <b>32%</b> | <b>TOTAL DISAGREE (NET)</b> |
| 13%        | SOMEWHAT DISAGREE           |
| 19%        | STRONGLY DISAGREE           |
| 17%        | DO NOT KNOW/CANNOT JUDGE    |

Figure 7. From *Center for Security Policy's* "Poll of U.S. Muslims Reveals Ominous Levels of Support For Islamic Supremacists' Doctrine of Shariah, Jihad." 23 June 2015.

13. "Violence against Americans here in the United States can be justified as part of the global jihad."

|            |                             |
|------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>25%</b> | <b>TOTAL AGREE (NET)</b>    |
| 13%        | STRONGLY AGREE              |
| 12%        | SOMEWHAT AGREE              |
| <b>64%</b> | <b>TOTAL DISAGREE (NET)</b> |
| 9%         | SOMEWHAT DISAGREE           |
| 55%        | STRONGLY DISAGREE           |
| 11%        | DO NOT KNOW/CANNOT JUDGE    |

Figure 8. From *Center for Security Policy's* "Poll of U.S. Muslims Reveals Ominous Levels Of Support For Islamic Supremacists' Doctrine of Shariah, Jihad." 23 June 2015

that Trump hopes to restrict.”<sup>149</sup> It’s reductive in the same way President Bush lumped Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Husain in the same category: all defining characteristics of an individual go out the window if they’re Muslim. That, and only that, is what dictates how they behave. In terms of imminent danger, Trump’s statistics rely on a well-cultivated conception of Muslim violence. There are certainly the more visceral acts the media latches onto, like mass shootings, but violence at this level isn’t the only type of violence. For example, during a February rally in Iowa, Trump told his supporters, should they see anyone who might be disruptive, to go ahead and “knock the crap out of ‘em...I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees, I promise. I promise.” Perhaps some of those poll respondents were thinking of violence in this way? My point is not to trivialize what happened in Boston or in New York City, but to highlight how rhetoric originating in the President of the United States, when it involves Islam, asks its audience to assume the worst. The statistics Trump referenced – while deeply flawed – assume the only type of violence Muslims will engage in is that of deadly terrorism. That’s been the narrative in film, politics, and journalism, in that when Muslims are featured, it’s because they’re connected to lethal terrorism.

Trump’s statements were covered by a variety of news sources and generated almost-universal condemnation, but this criticism lacked any conversation about why his comments were problematic. This lack of commentary illustrates how prevalent Islamophobia is: myriad cultural avenues routinely speak to the peril American citizens face due to Muslims. Going

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<sup>149</sup> Philip Bump, “Donald Trump's Call to Ban Muslim Immigrants Is Based on a Very Shoddy Poll,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 7, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trumps-call-to-ban-muslims-from-coming-to-the-u-s-has-a-very-bad-poll-at-its-center/>.

further than simply condemning the comments would place commentators in an uncomfortable spot of having to explain why so much American discourse is wrong. A November 2018 Pew Research study found 72% of Americans (61% Democrat/Democrat leaning and 84% Republican/Republican leaning) said “taking measures to protect the U.S. from terrorism” should be the country’s top long-range foreign policy goal.”<sup>150</sup> While Trump’s comments were inflammatory and bombastic, they reflected a widely-held cultural belief the country is in danger due to Islam.

### Right Wing Terror: A Neglected Threat

September 11<sup>th</sup> is a defining moment in terms of fear because it highlights how American society still privileges the thoughts and beliefs of white America. When the white body began fearing for its life, US policy began to change, ushering in the War on Terror. 9/11, then, was a moment of rupture, for it signaled the first time white America was in a perilous position, at least in terms of an (ostensibly) easily-identifiable enemy. Fifteen years later, sociologists Christopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, L. Edward Day, and Ann Gordon note that “Data from a national sample of Americans taken soon after the 2016 election show that, after partisan identification, the strongest predictors of voting for Trump were a measure of Islamophobia and identifying with exclusivist visions of Christian nationalism.”<sup>151</sup> Trump voters are overwhelmingly white, as

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<sup>150</sup> “Conflicting Partisan Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy” (Pew Charitable Trust, November 29, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/11/29/conflicting-partisan-priorities-for-u-s-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>151</sup> Christopher Bader et al., *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 86.

illustrated in a Pew Report, “Behind Trump’s victory: Divisions by race, gender, education,” where Alex Tyson and Shiva Maniam note the Republican won the white vote by 21 points (58% to 37% for Clinton).<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, another Pew report found roughly 70% of voters in the 2016 election were white.<sup>153</sup> People vote the way they do for all sorts of reasons, but there’s evidence a substantive number of Donald Trump voters (the majority of white voters) believed in Islamophobic rhetoric. This, combined with the massive resource allocation to the War on Terror (despite Islamic terror being rare) speaks to the power white America wields. Their fears dictate the country’s policies.

The fears of black and brown America don’t garner anywhere near the same level of political capital the fears of white America does. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of this fear discourse is the way it demands concerns in these communities be pushed to the side in place of the more dangerous War on Terror. For example, former NFL quarterback Collin Kaepernick’s protest of police violence in black communities quickly turned into a debate about his patriotism. Kaepernick refused to stand during the pre-game national anthem, and his protest quickly

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<sup>152</sup> Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, “Behind Trump’s Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender and Education,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>.

<sup>153</sup> “An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters” (Pew Research Center, August 9, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>. It is difficult to clearly identify racial demographics of voter turnout, but this report contains the following section: “Overall, whites with a four-year college degree or more education made up 30% of all validated voters. Among these voters, far more (55%) said they voted for Clinton than for Trump (38%). Among the much larger group of white voters who had not completed college (44% of all voters), Trump won by a more than two-to-one (64% to 28%).” According to this data, 74% of voters in the 2016 election were white.

devolved into accusations about his lack of support for American troops. This culminated in two instances where politicians used a fear of Muslim terror to squash conversations about police violence in black communities. The first came on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, when at an Alabama rally for GOP senate hopeful Luther Strange, President Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out!’”<sup>154</sup> The second came a few weeks later on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, when vice-president Mike Pence left an NFL football game because players were kneeling during the national anthem. Despite being a clear political stunt, Pence’s immediate October 8<sup>th</sup> Tweet illustrates how this fear discourse works: “I stand with @POTUS Trump with our soldiers, and I will always stand for our Flag and our National Anthem.”<sup>155</sup> There was no mention about what the NFL players were protesting in either instance. Instead, both men tacitly invoked Islamophobic discourse in saying they stand with those who are protecting the country. They didn’t have to say the military is protecting the country from Muslims because enough cultural narratives argue the largest threat to the US is Islamic terror. The logic here being that Muslims (as emphasized by myriad societal tropes) are a much greater threat to the country than police killings are to African American communities.

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<sup>154</sup> Bryan Graham, “Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protesters: ‘Get That Son of a Bitch off the Field’,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, September 23, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>.

<sup>155</sup> Mike Pence, “I Left Today’s Colts Game Because @POTUS and I Will Not Dignify Any Event That Disrespects Our Soldiers, Our Flag, or Our National Anthem.,” Twitter (Twitter, October 8, 2017), <https://twitter.com/vp45/status/917074120084516865>.

The conservative reaction to Kaepernick foregrounds how the fears of certain segments of the country drive national policy decisions, despite all communities having race-specific fears. For instance, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* poignantly illustrates how, as a black person, he was, and continues to be, very aware of his precarious existence.<sup>156</sup> To say the African American community wasn't affected by 9/11 would be in error, but when it comes to a fear of bodily harm, a young Coates growing up in Baltimore in the 1980s didn't need to see the Twin Towers fall to realize his body was in danger. Coates was keenly aware of his precarious existence at a young age, and decades later, as a father, he fears for the safety of his son, worrying his only child could lose his life at any minute due to the color of his skin. In *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, historian Adam Goodman argues the created panic surrounding the "crisis on the border" contributes to fear amongst immigrants, in that they (or those they love) could be deported at a moment's notice.<sup>157</sup> While not the type of mortal fear Coates examines, this illustrates how, once again, due to racialized systems of oppression, Hispanic immigrants can't be sure of their safety. Contrast these examples with David Foster Wallace's "the View from Mrs. Thompson's," where in recounting the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> from rural Indiana, Wallace is struck by the naivete of Thompson and her friends.<sup>158</sup> For seventy-four-year-old Mrs. Thompson, 9/11 is a truly

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<sup>156</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: One World, 2015).

<sup>157</sup> Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>158</sup> David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," in *Consider the Lobster (and Other Essays)* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), pp. 128-140.

unimaginable act. The thought she (as a member of white America) could be in danger had never crossed her mind. Going forward, US foreign and domestic policy are defined by the concerns expressed by the Mrs. Thompsons of the country.

Islamophobia, born out of the fears of a dominant white America, obscures the concerning growth of far-right domestic terror. In noting 21<sup>st</sup> century terrorism trends in the US, Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington note:

religious terrorism has killed the largest number of individuals – 3,086 people – primarily due to the attacks on September 11, 2001, which caused 2,977 deaths. The magnitude of this death toll fundamentally shaped U.S. counterterrorism policy over the past two decades. In comparison, right-wing terrorist attacks caused 335 deaths, left-wing attacks caused 22 deaths, and ethnonationalist terrorists caused 5 deaths.<sup>159</sup>

In American culture, 9/11 was a seismic event, but the way the War on Terror has governed societal discourse, through its prominence in entertainment and political realms, has worked to mask the growing threat of right-wing violence. Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington continue in explaining how 9/11, as a single event, has skewed perceptions of threat:

To evaluate the ongoing threat from different types of terrorists, however, it is useful to consider the proportion of fatalities attributed to each type of perpetrator annually. In 14 of the 21 years between 1994 and 2019 in which fatal terrorist attacks occurred, the majority of deaths resulted from right-wing attacks. In eight of these years, right-wing attackers caused all of the fatalities, and in three more – including 2018 and 2019 – they were responsible for more than 90 percent of annual fatalities. Therefore, while religious terrorists caused the largest number of total fatalities, right-wing attackers were most likely to cause more deaths in a given year.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Seth G Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, “The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>.

<sup>160</sup> Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington.

Not only did 9/11 shape fear discourses in the US for the past two decades, but American society continues to tiptoe around right-wing terrorism in a way it does not for Islamic terrorism. In short, the authors argue, “Our data suggest that right-wing extremists pose the most significant terrorism threat to the United States, based on annual terrorist events and fatalities.”<sup>161</sup> Despite this evidence, American culture focuses on Islamic extremism as the greatest threat to American safety. In the end, Islamophobia reveals the continued dominance of white hegemony (in terms of whose fear matters) and a country’s unwillingness to reckon with violence perpetrated by those who look like the stereotypical American citizen.

### Based On A True(R) Story

In a 1990 article for *The Atlantic*, Harvard historian Bernard Lewis puts forth a “clash of civilization” argument that informs much of the US’s current War on Terror.<sup>162</sup> Throughout his essay, Lewis cites and then dismisses factors that could explain anti-US sentiment in Muslim countries. Specifically, he refutes the most common explanations, which include the US’s support for Israel, authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes, and imperialism in general. Lewis dismisses them all before settling on the real culprit: “this mood [hostility towards the West] is surely due to a feeling of humiliation – a growing awareness, among the heirs of an old, proud, and long dominant civilization, of having been overtaken, overborne, and overwhelmed by those whom they regarded as their inferiors,” and goes on to further explain “the struggle of the

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<sup>161</sup> Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington.

<sup>162</sup> Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, September 1990), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>.

fundamentalists is against two enemies, secularism and modernism.”<sup>163</sup> This binary struggle would be invoked on a national scale a decade later when, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, George W. Bush delivered an address to the nation in which he echoed Lewis’s argument: “Americans are asking, ‘Why do they hate us?’ ...[t]hey hate our freedoms.”<sup>164</sup> Most Islamophobic rhetoric I’ve examined deploys a fear of bodily harm, but this is inexorably linked to the binary thinking inherent in a clash of civilizations argument, one dependent on a conception of the West as progressive and modern and the East as everything regressive and antiquated. This fear proves invaluable for politicians because it sees the US, as a symbol for everything that’s good, involved in an epic struggle against a diametrically opposite entity in that of the Muslim world. This is the logic behind the BOTS genre of 21<sup>st</sup> century American war films, in that we don’t need to know anything about the Arab antagonists. They simply hate us because they, as Bush noted, hate our freedom.

Studying and remedying US Islamophobia highlights the necessity of cultural and biological analyses. The work of scholars like Edward Said, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber are all vital for understanding how these representations circulate throughout the globe and affect foreign and domestic policy. At the same time, that scholarship often omits why these same tropes continue to garner such political and social capital, which is where psychology and neurology can offer further insight. For example, Naber shows how Arab/Muslim has become a

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<sup>163</sup> Lewis.

<sup>164</sup> George W Bush, “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” The Washington Post (WP Company, September 20, 2001), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress092001.html>.

catch-all for potential terrorist, but she doesn't examine where that framework originates. While she alludes to media representations in writing "Persons who closely resembled the corporate media's 'Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim look' were particularly vulnerable to federal government policies and harassment on the streets,"<sup>165</sup> that's only part of the picture. Those media representations "work" because human brains are wired to build fear associations with those who look and sound different, which connects to Islamophobia, in that a large swath of the American voting populace would be naturally inclined to build fear associations with stereotypical-looking Muslims. Furthermore, once fear associations have been built, they never simply go away. In fact, the prevalence of Islamophobic tropes in American society ensures these associations are continually reinforced and strengthened. This explains why Islamic terror dominates political cycles in a way growing right-wing terrorism doesn't. Not only is the country awash in narratives that say Islam is what the country needs to fear, but those strong emotive responses are easier to generate when the dangerous entity is someone who looks and sounds different than the dominant voting bloc (white America). This scientific angle offers its greatest insight in that telling people to stop being afraid of Muslims, by itself, won't work. Fear never just goes away. It's eliminated through active learning, in which people learn a fear trigger isn't dangerous. We can critique the Islamophobic tropes found in American culture – and we should – but we should also work to highlight texts that feature Muslims as peoples unconnected to the US's War on Terror. This is the type of learning that's necessary for combatting Islamophobia. Nuanced representations interrupt the fear pathways cultivated through American popular and political

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<sup>165</sup> Naber, "'Look, the Terrorist Is Coming,'" 296.

culture, yet this remedy begs an important question: can you present an accurate representation of large swaths of people?

Educators at both the secondary and postsecondary level have a unique opportunity to address American Islamophobia through teaching texts that present Muslims as people and not superficial antagonist constructs that further fear narratives. Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *The Complete Persepolis*, is accessible to a variety of audiences, lays out the complexities and flaws of the clash of civilizations argument, and ultimately forces readers to examine how they encounter texts "meant" to represent a drastically different culture. *Persepolis* includes sections that refute the type of binary logic found in Lewis's essay and George W. Bush's speech, yet in other areas, it seems to confirm it. For example, Satrapi includes a short preface where she says she's grown tired of seeing her Iranian culture denigrated throughout the world, and she takes pains to explain how the backwards components of Iranian society are a product of the politicization of state-sponsored Islam. Yet at the same time, she ultimately leaves Iran because, as a progressive woman, it's an inhospitable climate for her. This exodus serves as the story's ending, and this realization about Iran devastates Satrapi. *Persepolis* offers a humanizing representation lacking in the language of Bush and Trump's rhetoric and the character constructions of Islamic terrorists in the BOTS genre. At the same time though, it seems to support some of the assertions of Lewis's article in that modern, progressive life appears to be at odds with the theocracy installed in Iran. Furthermore, reading this memoir in opposition to

Islamophobia calls to attention a more complicated issue: how the work of certain authors is asked to offer insight into a greater culture that we likely wouldn't ask of a white author.

Throughout *Persepolis*, Satrapi includes evidence that can be used to both support and refute the Islam vs. progressive binary inherent in the clash of civilizations argument and foundational to the overall fear discourse. In beginning her story with a chapter titled "The Veil," she introduces the political and cultural component of Islam in Iran. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, girls were forced to wear a veil, and the nonreligious French school a young Marjane had been attending was shut down. A series of panels on the second page focuses on how this change is a product of politics, not religion. The man responsible for delivering the decree stands behind a podium indicative of a formal setting, and he is dressed, not in the garb of a religious



Figure 9. Illustrates how the veil mandate is a product of cultural and political machinations, not just religion.

authority, but in the clothes of a secular man. His reasoning, overtly political, and as the sarcastic responses in the middle panel emphasize, bordering on the ridiculous. The illustrations for this series suggest an intent to ridicule the absurdity of the new regime. You can almost hear the menacing, guttural growl of decadence the man uses, along with the way in which his audience eats it all up, yet his statement on it being a symbol of capitalism isn't entirely inaccurate. France was one of the dominant imperial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and while never overtly

involved in Iran, an Iranian citing a French school in a Middle Eastern country as a symbol for something bad has a degree of truth to it. This isn't merely a semantic argument as much as it is an effort to highlight that, whatever hyperbolic and inflammatory rhetoric the figure uses to justify recent changes, it's tied to politics. Furthermore, if there were any question regarding the man's affiliation, the following panel lays them to rest. It includes a full-body drawing, where the remainder of his military garb, complete with combat boots, is revealed. The process of veiling, a longstanding symbol of religious oppression (for Western audiences) comes about and is enforced through military and governmental channels.

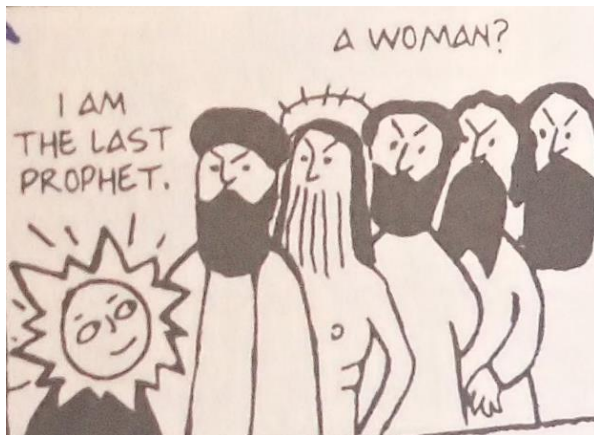


Figure 10. Illustrates the first time a young Marjane recognized the patriarchal nature of Islam.

Despite foregrounding the political context of the veil mandate, Satrapi is aware of the socially backwards components of Islam, particularly when it comes to gender roles. Her childhood goal is to become the last prophet, and the memoir frequently depicts the conversations she has with God about this. And while God is always very encouraging, her classmates, teachers, and parents are decidedly less enthusiastic when she proclaims her intent.

Her parents recommend, instead, that she aim for something like a doctor.<sup>166</sup> While an endearing childhood anecdote, a small, subsequent panel suggests the patriarchal nature of Islam. In this frame, when she informs the previous prophets she is one of them, they respond with surprise, but also something bordering on anger (note the eyebrows). This is, from what I can find, the only time she overtly criticizes the religious Islam. This is an insight into what a young Marjane realized: that all the important religious figures were men, and a woman trying to gain entrance into that world would be met with some combination of disbelief, resistance, and/or anger. Throughout, Satrapi emphasizes how political forces work to oppress society through Islam, but she also acknowledges, brief as it may be, some of the repressive flaws inherent in the religion itself. One panel, in particular, speaks to the paradox inherent in this memoir. Here, we must



Figure 11. The construction of this panel illustrates the binary a young Marjane faces.

look at the visual component (a clear dichotomy) in conjunction with the other components of the veil chapter (Islam connected to political Iran). Satrapi's inability to come down on one side

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<sup>166</sup> Satrapi, 8-9.

or the other of this binary speaks to the silliness of the veil mandate instituted, but also the ridiculous nature of the overall binary. There should be – and indeed there is – a way for Satrapi to be both modern and Muslim, but that’s a space not allowed in Iran. Nor is it an option in 21<sup>st</sup> century American representations of Middle Eastern peoples.



Figure 12. Satrapi’s reunion with her Iranian friends illustrates how visual appearance isn’t always in line with religious beliefs.

Satrapi spends her teenage years at a boarding school in Austria, and upon returning and seeing her old friends, she has an exchange characteristic of the memoir’s ambivalent stance on West/East binary logic. The first time Marjane sees her friends again, she’s visibly shaken, as it’s her friends who seem to embody the very Western, sexualized female form.<sup>167</sup> When Marjane then admits she didn’t go to the famed European night clubs while in Vienna, her friends express shock, and then resort to a playful(ish) mockery of her for always playing the part of the rebel. This exchange speaks to how appearances are coded along European/Muslim lines and their free/repressed connotations. The following chapter, “Skiing,” builds upon this idea and illustrates how appearance is also linked to sexual promiscuity.

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<sup>167</sup> Satrapi, 259.

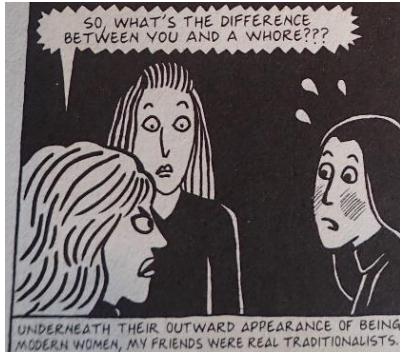


Figure 13. Further illustrating how sexuality and appearance don't always line up.

A subsequent ski trip lays out how *Persepolis* toys with the idea you can present an authentic depiction of someone's culture. On the final evening of this trip, one of her friends asks if Marjane has had sex, to which she responds "Of course, I'm 19!"<sup>168</sup> They continue with a few questions, and when Marjane mentions she's slept with more than one man, the tone of the conversation shifts dramatically, and it's no longer the experienced friend sharing taboo information in a moment of friendly intimacy. More than an example of a growing rift between friends, this exchange shows just how pernicious the idea of a real and stable identity is. In the text box beneath this panel, Satrapi acknowledges the appearance of her friends doesn't line up with their beliefs, at least as she sees it, which ultimately highlights the difficulties in assuming there are stable identities. Her point about her friends being "real traditionalists," makes sense given the exchange they've just had, yet if that's the case, there must be real Muslims, and real Iranians. This is an instance of Satrapi's narrative seeming to fall into the trap it's trying to undermine, as it suggests there's the possibility of creating an accurate representation of an

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<sup>168</sup> Satrapi, 270.

Iranian. At the same time though, this contradiction highlights how flawed that notion of a real anything is in the first place.

In her penultimate chapter, “The Satellite,” in which Satrapi explains how satellite TV allowed an Iranian audience the opportunity to see how the rest of the world viewed the Middle East, her parents offer the most damning critique of Western progressivism. Satrapi touches on the historical components that lead up to this scene, circa late 1991, but a short summary is helpful in putting her parents’ words in perspective. In September of 1980, shortly after the Islamic Revolution, which served as the opening for *Persepolis*, Iraq invaded Iran, and over the next eight years there was a protracted war that would cost the two countries an estimated 367,000 lives and accomplish virtually nothing in terms of the border disputes that (ostensibly) served as the impetus for Iraq’s invasion.<sup>169</sup> The rest of the world, for the most part, supported Iraq, with one of the US’s overall ideas being that Iraq’s secular Ba’athist government had an important role to play in maintaining stability in the region, particularly in relation to Iran’s new theocratic government. Suddenly, once the war ended and Iraq then invaded Kuwait in 1991, according to the Western media outlets the Satrapis were watching, Iraq was suddenly the bad guy, guilty of untold atrocities. Satrapi’s parents point out the hypocrisy here, with her mother saying, “Personally, I hate Saddam and I have no sympathy for the Kuwaitis, but I hate just as much the cynicism of the allies who call themselves ‘liberators’ while they’re there for the oil.”<sup>170</sup> Her father, more pointedly, sums it up in saying “The worst is that the intervention in

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<sup>169</sup> William L Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 5th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), 435.

<sup>170</sup> Satrapi, 322.

Kuwait is done in the name of human rights!!! Which rights? Which humans?" The imagery of both these panels is important too, as they feature figures speaking directly to the audience. This



Figure 15. Satrapi's mother.



Figure 14. Satrapi's father.

is not the only time Satrapi illustrates her memoir this way, but it's by no means a regular occurrence. Here, Satrapi pauses for a moment to pull the reader out of the story and force them to reflect on a fundamental component of how the West views the Middle East. The characters look directly at the reader to ensure their point is not missed. Not only does *Persepolis* illustrate how the Islam vs. progressivism binary is flawed because it's more than just the religion being repressive, but progressive ideology, which is purported to be the ideal that countries should aspire to carries its own set of unflattering contradictions.

*Persepolis* is constructed in a way in which readers are continually reminded that yes, religion plays an important role in Iranian society, but so do politics; they're hopelessly intertwined and highlight how binary logic is deeply flawed. As a child, Satrapi recognizes the patriarchal nature of religion, but she also recognizes how the state of Iran uses religion to oppress its citizens. In this way, she's writing against a dominate Islamophobic outlook that views Middle Eastern countries as little more than American/freedom-hating theocracies. At the same time, Part I and Part II feature exit scenes where Marjane leaves Iran, and in structuring her narrative this way, Satrapi perpetuates the idea that progressive people, women in particular, have no place in Iran. Literally, they must flee the country. Ending the conversation there, however, is doing a disservice to the rest of the memoir, and a more fitting way to look at this would be to read *Persepolis*' inability to address the Islam vs. progressive society binary as an instance in which a Western audience holds an Iranian writer to a different standard when it comes to her story.

From an artistic memoir standpoint, these exit scenes serve as nice closing points. They also reaffirm one of the troubling components that persists throughout: you can't be a progressive woman in Iran. In the final chapter, "The End," after she has divorced her husband and tells her family she has decided to move to France, her father offers this: "Well, we're very happy with your decision. You weren't made to live here. We Iranians, we're crushed not only by the government but by the weight of our traditions."<sup>171</sup> The final thing her mother tells her while they are saying goodbye in the airport is "This time, you're leaving for good. You are a

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<sup>171</sup> Satrapi, 339.

free woman. The Iran of today is not for you. I forbid you to come back!”<sup>172</sup> Understanding Marjane’s response in this panel is vital. It’s superficially quite simple: it’s a tearful goodbye with a child deferring to her mother, and this could certainly be accurate. The panel can also read as a tearful acknowledgement that Iran isn’t a place for free women. This puts the final scene with her mother in a slightly different perspective. Yes, Marjane is crying at the thought of leaving her family, but she’s also crying at the realization that Iran simply isn’t a place for her.



Figure 17. The close of Part I sees the family distraught over Marjane’s exit.



Figure 16. The close of Part II sees the family, for the most part, excited that Marjane is leaving Iran.

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<sup>172</sup> Satrapi, 341.

The two final images of both Part I and Part II highlight the differences and similarities in her exits. In the first, a visibly distraught Marjane looks on as her mother faints upon seeing off her teenage daughter. The second includes much happier faces, with the exception of her grandmother. The makeup of the panels is almost identical. The faceless, shadowed people are the exact same, and the two-non-family members whose faces are exposed are in the same location. The placement of Marjane and her parents, in relation to the rest of the frame is almost identical as well. In fact, Marjane herself is in the exact same spot, though the speech box in the second panel obscures some of the windows. This emphasizes that something has changed in the lives of these people, since everything about the exit is the same, but now they're happy. The second text box reaffirms the ideas referenced in the goodbye panel with her mother. Yes, in leaving Iran everyone makes sacrifices, and while it's difficult at times, ultimately it's a price worth paying.

The panels being so similar in their format, yet so very different in their emotional connotations draw attention to the events that have transpired between them. And the events of Part II reflect a myriad of Western-styled stories of growth. To start, a teenage Satrapi is forced out of her privileged comfort zone in moving to Austria, where she struggles to fit in before finding a group of friends, misfits themselves, who accept her.<sup>173</sup> At one point, she realizes she's been acting as though she's ashamed of her Iranian heritage, and then in a very public outburst, proclaims she's proudly Iranian.<sup>174</sup> She starts using marijuana as a coping mechanism and almost

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<sup>173</sup> Satrapi, 164-172.

<sup>174</sup> Satrapi, 196-197

smokes her way out of the secondary school she's attending before making a valiant final effort that sees her graduate "by the skin of my teeth."<sup>175</sup> Her first serious relationship ends because her boyfriend, Marcus, was cheating on her, and while this devastates Marjane, she later realizes she had placed an unfair burden on him, in that he was her entire support system in Austria.<sup>176</sup> Upon returning to Iran, she enrolls in university, finds a more progressive group of friends, rejects the authoritarian nature of Iran, gets married and later divorced, and then finally decides to leave her beloved country. This time for good. The content between these two very different end panels reads like a series of personal-growth anecdotes, which implies the natural progression for a fully-formed modern adult is to leave Middle Eastern countries.

Time and time again, Satrapi alludes to the complexities of life in Iran, and in this way, she's actively working against a reductionist view of Muslim-majority countries that sees all the negative societal things (at least from a Western perspective) as being a product of a religion that can't escape from its traditional and repressive roots. In focusing on the way her life seems dictated by religion, but is actually more a product of the government, Satrapi contradicts this framework. At the same time though, her memoir sometimes supports this same notion, and the ending of *The Complete Persepolis* is one of those times. Despite everything, at the end of the day, she leaves Iran for France.

Islamophobia frames Middle Eastern political and social turmoil around a simplistic Islam vs. progressivism binary. There is no way to be a progressive Muslim, and hence, why

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<sup>175</sup> Satrapi, 226.

<sup>176</sup> Satrapi, 237.

someone like Satrapi is destined to leave Iran for a Western country. On a certain level, this is accurate, and the final chapter makes it clear Marjane chooses to leave Iran for these exact reasons. However, it would be more accurate to say that, in refusing to neatly dismantle this Islam vs. progressive binary (as she claims she will in the introduction), Satrapi showcases the particularly disheartening catch-22 nature of being a Muslim author trying to talk about her childhood. For in making a clear, step-by-step takedown of how you can be a progressive Muslim, she'd be engaging in the exact same type of rhetoric she set out to dispel because such a narrative would be predicated on the idea there is an authentic or real Iranian life: it's just been that up until this point, the depictions of Iranians haven't been accurate. Satrapi refuses to play this game, and the ways her narrative both refutes and affirms this binary focuses attention on the fact that, when it comes to representations of Muslims in 21<sup>st</sup> century media, they're expected to fit into one side of the Islam vs. progressive binary. In effect, within the US, Islamophobia determines the stories Middle Eastern peoples can tell, as they're forced to situate themselves within a progressive/repressive epistemology.

Satrapi crafts her illustrations in a manner that draws attention to this paradox. Her sparse and simple drawings, along with their black and white color palate, assist in what author/illustrator Scott McCloud says is a universalizing component of comics: "the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe."<sup>177</sup> This applies on two different levels in *Persepolis*. First, as McCloud notes, it makes the memoir more appealing and marketable. Second, and more important for dismantling this particular fear discourse, in

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<sup>177</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 31.

making her images less realistic, Satrapi draws attention to a paradoxical component of representations. This artistic framework allows more people to relate to the story of an economically privileged Iranian girl coming of age during a very tumultuous time, but at the same time, the images being so “unreal,” draw attention towards the ridiculous nature of reading a memoir as a factual text that will offer insight into what that society is like. It’s almost as if the images are yelling at the reader: “These aren’t real people here on the page – you shouldn’t be reading this to get information about Iranians!” While in certain cases, the visual component of her memoir augments specific points she’s making, overall, they work throughout to undermine what she sets out to do, offer a “true” representation of life in Iran.

*Persepolis* serves as an important text to combat 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamophobic rhetoric because it ties in well with the types of established humanities scholarship found throughout secondary and post-secondary education. The text contains substantial literary and artistic worth, helping avoid the perception it’s been included simply as a token gesture of multiculturalism. Focusing on the content and structure of *Persepolis* disrupts the types of characterization found throughout the BOTS genre of film and the simplified dichotomous rhetoric found in politics. It presents Iranians as people, complete with flaws and contradictions. An understanding of the science of fear, particularly fear extinction, tells us Islamophobia will never disappear if those representations continue to circulate. Once those fear responses are ingrained, it takes more than facts to override those well-travelled and cultivated neural paths. People must learn Muslims are not threats, and a text like *Persepolis* does this in bringing to the fore discussion of how this discourse circulates because Satrapi’s memoir operates in a distinctly different way.

The Truth Is Out There

In the introduction to the 2004 edition of *The Complete Persepolis*, Satrapi offers insight into why she has undertaken this particular memoir: “Since [the 1979 Islamic revolution], this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth.” On the surface, this is a relatively tame claim. Satrapi attempts a corrective to 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamophobia’s sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications of Middle Eastern societies. Yet readers would be wise to listen to Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams, who coin the term “neo-Orientalism,” a product of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s boom in exilic memoirs. For Behdad and Williams, “Neo-Orientalist authority is an *experiential* form of authority, an authority construed and claimed not only through having lived in the Middle East but also by having a ‘feel’ for this particular society as a Middle Easterner, a kind of native sense of the people, their culture, and political situation.”<sup>178</sup> Being from a certain country – by itself – doesn’t qualify someone to enlighten the rest of the world about what that country is really like. Yet that’s exactly what Satrapi does at the outset, and this introduction gets at the point Behdad and Williams make in their essay. Certain texts and authors end up speaking for their entire culture in a way that can further some Orientalist-tinged ideologies.

The way this text repeatedly confirms and rejects binary Islamophobic tropes reflects a deeply entrenched idea that “true” representations exist. Somewhere, in the minds of readers, that

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<sup>178</sup> Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams, “Neo-Orientalism,” in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 283-299, 286.

notion of truth existing floats around in the ether. Silly as it seems, the introduction to the David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson *X-Files*, which featured spooky music and ended with “THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE” flashing on the screen, is a great example of how this ideology functions. It’s prominent, very ethereal, and a little bit mysterious. Upon close examination though, despite what different narratives suggests, it doesn’t really exist. Yet it factors into our daily lives in untold ways. TV shows and movies allude to it (the entire BOTS genre). Even the construction of the US legal system relies upon it, in that the penalties for lying under oath can be so severe because this is the one time you must tell the truth. It’s everywhere, and it can lead an author like Marjane Satrapi to begin her memoir with an introduction that claims she will reveal the truth about Iranian life when what she produces is a narrative replete with contradictions.

Inexorably linked with discussions of truth, is that of authority, and identity is foundational for both. For memoirs, authority and truth are about who has an opportunity to tell their stories, and why, given the particular time period, are they allotted that privilege. In *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock offers a succinct view on how to think about this issue, in arguing “the memoir is a genre for those who are authorized and who have acquired cultural legitimacy and influence.”<sup>179</sup> If you want to know what a society values, you look at who it authorizes to deliver a “true” story, and thus, we can think of the BOTS genre as memoir-lite. These films aren’t memoirs per se (with the exception of *American Sniper*), but they traffic in the idea their stories have been authorized by American society. These are the types of

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<sup>179</sup> Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 20.

texts granted cultural legitimacy and influence, and it's against this genre that we should set *Persepolis*. While Marjane Satrapi is authorized and wields a certain amount of influence and legitimacy, this is only as long as she purports to offer insight into what being an Iranian is really like. She's given a voice, but only if she agrees to talk about certain things. This lends her an impressive amount of shrewdness then, as she both conforms to this with a clearly-demarcated introduction that proffers a corrective on Islamophobia, but also spends a large part of her narrative undermining that very premise. It's a testament to how subaltern peoples never quite get the same amount of agency as others, and to how those writers can operate within the strictures of their environment to draw attention to that issue.

Behdad and Williams critique numerous texts that traffic in a sense of authentic ethnic identity, whether intentional or not, to perpetuate Orientalist tropes. They single out Satrapi as being the exception though, in writing "Satrapi is intentionally absent from the list of authors we have been considering because we believe her oeuvre presents in many ways an original and artful challenge to the neo-Orientalist tendencies pervading the works we have discussed here."<sup>180</sup> They mention *Persepolis* by name, but then use an excerpt from a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* interview in which Satrapi refuses to acknowledge the interviewer's assertion her work's main theme is denouncing Islamic fanaticism and its repressive tendencies. This reads like a historian's take on the text, in that Behdad and Williams rely on an interview instead of the work itself. But neither scholar is a trained historian. In fact, both have made their academic careers interpreting texts of varying mediums, and then commenting on their cultural

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<sup>180</sup> Behdad and Williams, "Neo-Orientalism," 296.

significance and work. Ali Behdad is a professor of comparative literature at UCLA, and the first two entries listed under his interests are “postcolonial Literature and Theory; Literary and Cultural Theory.” Juliet Williams is a professor of Gender Studies at UCLA and has written quite extensively on gender in its societal and cultural context. It should be easy for them to find examples from the text of *Persepolis* that show how the memoir subverts neo-Orientalist thought, yet they opt for an interview instead. This is bizarre given how the rest of their essay is structured. They use specific texts, like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, to explain how they contribute to neo-Orientalist thought, so why not use specifics from the one text that resists it? Why the interview? The answer, I think, lies in the way Satrapi continually plays with the idea of a stable sense of identity, and by extension, the flawed notion a memoir can represent those identities (and that readers can then extrapolate them to larger groups of people). One of the biggest problems with neo-Orientalism is the way authorial authenticity is used to present accurate (or true) depictions of marginalized peoples. Citing components of *Persepolis*, particularly in the abbreviated amount of space Behdad and Williams have, would run the risk of reaffirming the same thing: that Satrapi has somehow managed to give a good representation of Iranian people. The interview, then, while seemingly at odds with the rest of their article, makes sense because it features Satrapi saying, as an Iranian author, she wants no part of the western-styled Muslim representation discussion.

*Persepolis* presents a useful tool to combat Islamophobia, but in doing so, it also highlights the troubling nature of this fear discourse. To a certain extent, in choosing *Persepolis* because it presents a “correct” version of Islamic life, I’m running afoul of what Behdad and Williams critique. But this uneasy relationship speaks to the difficulty in remedying such a

deeply entrenched fear narrative like Islamophobia, and it's where science is instructive. Pointing out the flawed representations that circulate in a variety of US media will go only so far.

Islamophobia, as a fear discourse, relies on constructed emotive responses. To eliminate fear responses requires texts that presents Arab and/or Muslim figures as something other than terrorists. This is active learning, in that over time, people would grow to realize there is no threat in that particular fear trigger. While teaching *Persepolis* isn't going to single-handedly eliminate Islamophobia, texts like this are absolutely a requirement.

## THE APPEARANCE OF GUN VIOLENCE

Donald Pease begins *The New American Exceptionalism* by explaining that a “state fantasy does not refer to a mystification but to the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity.”<sup>181</sup> For Pease, a fantasy is not the nonsensical daydream of someone trying to escape reality, but the epistemological underpinnings of how citizens make sense of their worlds. Pease’s ultimate argument is that once the Cold War ended, the country lost its primary antagonist, and as a result, it became harder to construct a national identity. Pease then charts different fantasies in the 1990s and early 2000s, as various frameworks tried to provide the country with a state fantasy capable of incorporating a variety of traumatic events. None were as effective as the Cold War though, so all eventually fell to the wayside and were replaced with something else. Pease’s point about the disappearance of an all-encompassing state fantasy helps explain why various types of fear have grown so prominent throughout the country. Once the USSR disappeared as the definitive concerning entity for the US, there was vacuum that allowed, and has continued to allow, myriad fear discourses to flourish. While people don’t pick and choose their fears in the same way they select from a menu at a restaurant, in the absence of a definitive threat, the preponderance of fear narratives circulating throughout the country ensures people can always find something to fear.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of these fears is the public conversation concerning gun violence, a product of both pro-gun and gun-control advocates utilizing a variety of fear logics. For example, while Pease doesn’t analyze guns per se, he does chart how the absence of a foreign

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<sup>181</sup> Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1.

bogeyman allowed a militarized distrust of the federal government to take root and grow in the mid-1990s.<sup>182</sup> And we see remnants of this ideology throughout the gun discourse spectrum. On one side, a frequent trope found amongst the most ardent supporters of gun ownership is that firearms are necessary to keep the federal government from infringing on the rights of its citizens. On the other side, texts critical of gun ownership often reference the specter of past gun violence in conjunction with the potential for violence that accompanies extremist militia rhetoric.

Instead of focusing on being for or against guns (though this inevitably infects my analysis given the nature of this topic) I've oriented this chapter around fear triggers, that is, what Americans need fear. The first, stranger danger (SD), crafts the notion guns are necessary to protect law abiding and innocent citizens from harm. The second, wrong people (WP), foregrounds how guns are readily available to the wrong individuals, and thus the country is in danger. Both narratives mask larger, more complicated societal concerns. Stranger danger fear masks that the most dangerous people are those we know (as opposed to the strangers we need guard against). In stoking fear regarding who has access to guns, wrong people narratives mask similarities between Islamophobia (largely a product of right-leaning commentary) and gun control advocacy (largely a product of left-leaning commentary). Together though, these fear

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<sup>182</sup> Donald E. Pease, "America of the Two Covenants: The Waco Siege and the Oklahoma City Bombing," in *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 68-97.

discourses, in preying on human physiology, simplify a remarkably complex topic into simplistic pro and anti-gun rhetoric surrounding background checks.

Both SD and WP fear discourses reference events that, while statistically unlikely, are magnified to the extent they come to serve as viable things the American public should fear. Sociologists Bader, Baker, Day, and Gordon point out that “if a person is going to be murdered, it will most likely be by someone he or she knows.”<sup>183</sup> Both fear narratives ignore this reality. Films like 2008’s *The Brave One* and the National Rifle Association’s Armed Citizen Report function as important texts for the way they subtly establish visually-distinct strangers as the dangerous entity, when data to the contrary says people should be most afraid of those they live, work, and play with. A June 2021 entry for the NRA’s Armed Citizen Report, titled “Woman Shoots Male Intruder Multiple Times in House with Children Inside”<sup>184</sup> frames the event as a random encounter in which gun owners kept themselves and their family safe. On the other side of the debate, WP narratives identify militias as particularly dangerous and connect them to the potential for violence. For example, in Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, he interviews Michigan militia members that he then links to the men who bombed the Oklahoma City building in 1995.<sup>185</sup> This connection is certainly there (the bombers did attend some of the militia gatherings), but the structure of Moore’s documentary makes this connection seem more overt

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<sup>183</sup> Bader, Baker, Day, and Gordon, *Fear Itself*, 98.

<sup>184</sup> “Woman Shoots Male Intruder Multiple Times in House with Children Inside,” NRA-ILA (Institute for Legislative Action, April 20, 2021), <https://www.nraila.org/articles/20210820/woman-shoots-male-intruder-multiple-times-in-house-with-children-inside>.

<sup>185</sup> *Bowling for Columbine*, directed by Michael Moore (MGM Distribution, 2002).

and alarming than it really is. SD and WP deploy fear logics differently, but the end result is the same in reminding the country of the danger it faces.

The fear narratives that define US gun discourse are unique and have become so vitriolic because guns themselves affect human psychology in a way other fear objects don't. In "The Weapons Priming Effect," Arline James Benjamin Jr. and Brad J. Bushman note an established field of scholarship that finds "exposure to weapons increases aggressive behavior."<sup>186</sup> When they go on to write "someone who has aggressive ideas might also feel angry and have elevated blood pressure,"<sup>187</sup> they're effectively referring to top-down influencing, in that thinking aggressive thoughts leads to an altered physiological state. In further explaining "these internal states, in turn, can influence appraisal and decision processes,"<sup>188</sup> they're referencing bottom-up influencing, in that the physiological state affects how they react to a particular stimulus. It's not that one causes the other, as much as they both factor into aggressive behavior. What the weapons priming effect argues is that the mere presence of weapons, be they actual or pictorial, leads to an increase in aggressive appraisals of situations. I would argue this is why the gun debate is so simplistic and breaks down into pro/anti binaries. Not only is this cultural arena dominated by fear narratives, which limit the amount of work done by the pre-frontal cortex, but it's also a discourse centered around weapons, which also increases the likelihood people will

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<sup>186</sup> Arlin James Benjamin and Brad J Bushman, "The Weapons Priming Effect," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 12 (2016): pp. 45-48, 45.

<sup>187</sup> Benjamin and bushman, 46.

<sup>188</sup> Benjamin and Bushman, 46.

respond in a more aggressive manner. The discussion surrounding gun violence in the US is tailor-made to generate incredibly powerful affect-heavy responses.

### From Whom Do You Need Protection?

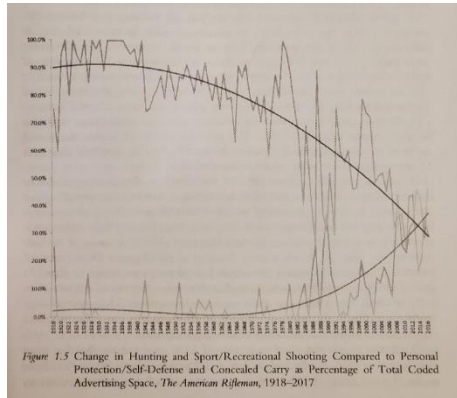


Figure 18. A graph illustrating how gun advertisements have shifted to focus on personal protection instead of sport.

In understanding 21<sup>st</sup> century SD, there is a notable shift, recounted through a variety of sociological research, that explains how gun ownership has shifted from sport (hunting and target shooting) to protection. Jennifer Carlson, Krisin A. Goss, and Harel Shapira cite Pew Research surveys that found “In 1999, the primary reason gun owners gave for owning a gun was hunting (49%), with only a minority (26%) claiming protection as their motivation. By 2013, these figures were reversed, with protection becoming the number one reason (48%), and hunting dropping to a secondary motivation (32%).”<sup>189</sup> David Yamane, Sebastian L. Ivory, and Paul Yamane find this trend has been mirrored in gun advertisements as well: where once the pages of

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<sup>189</sup> Jennifer Carlson, Harel Shapira, and Kristin A. Goss, eds., “Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice,” in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-8, 2.

the *American Rifleman* (the official publication of the NRA) were dominated by advertisements for sport shooting and hunting, there has been a steady increase in advertisements centered on personal protection (figure 18).<sup>190</sup> Gun ownership and advertisements have shifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to a place where, though not overtly tied to fear, they both speak to how American citizens are in perilous situations.

Humans think their way into stressful situations, which in turn affects behavior, and we see this play out in another realm of SD gun discourse: concealed carry. Sociologists Harel Shapira and Samantha J. Simon saw this firsthand in ethnographic research focusing on individuals who carried guns and participated in concealed-carry training. As they noted, it was the perception of threat that mattered most:

the development of this need did not emerge from a specific experience of victimization, but rather from learning how to think about risk and danger in the world. We witnessed this learning process first-hand at gun schools, where instructors encourage participants to think of the world as a dangerous place and of themselves as vulnerable without a gun.<sup>191</sup>

One of the instructors in their study, CJ, emphasized the need to constantly envision the types of dangerous situations that would necessitate the use of their guns and to practice “situational awareness” at all times.<sup>192</sup> It’s doubtful any of those participants would say their gun courses

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<sup>190</sup> David Yamane, Sebastian L Ivory, and Paul Yamane, “The Rise of Self-Defense in Gun Advertising: The American Rifleman, 1918-2017,” in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Harel Shapira, and Kristin A. Goss (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 9-27, 10.

<sup>191</sup> Harel Shapira and Samantha J. Simon, “Learning to Need a Gun,” *Qualitative Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2018): pp. 1-20, 7.

<sup>192</sup> Shapira and Simon, 12.

caused them stress, but this is the type of work fear discourses do, in that by emphasizing the need for protection, the entire industry reminds people of the danger they face.

This emphasis on the danger posed by an imagined-enemy factors into advertisements as well. Peter Squires argues “the gun industry sells far more than fear, it markets an attitude, a feeling for weaponized security, a kind of mental toughness, an affinity for firearms and a sense of the sovereign individual self.”<sup>193</sup> Squires focuses on the language of handgun advertisements, noting “the semi-automatics being offered to customers in the mid-1990s advertisements are light to carry, concealable, easy to use, accurate and fast to target, quick to shoot and powerful – shot after shot, if need be. These are precisely the attributes of a self-defense, combat ready firearm.”<sup>194</sup> The language here (fast, quick, powerful) heightens the idea of danger, in that victimization can happen in a moment, and people need to be prepared for it with the appropriate handgun. This dovetails with the instruction found in firearms classes, where gun owners are asked to be constantly vigilant.

This scholarship provides evidence for how fear circulates in gun industry channels, but it doesn’t touch on how fear permeates other parts of public life. The power of fear stems from the fact it’s found in so many different places, so while the work of these sociologists is certainly important, it’s not just the gun industry that creates and circulates texts emphasizing the danger Americans face.

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<sup>193</sup> Peter Squires, “Semi-automatics for the People? The Marketing of a New Kind of Man,” in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Harel Shapira, and Kristin A. Goss (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 28-51, 29.

<sup>194</sup> Squires, 40.

Stranger Danger's Fear Triggers

In the last two decades there's been a proliferation of movies that foreground the importance of guns as a means of family protection, particularly as it pertains to random acts of violence. Most notably is 2007's *The Brave One*, starring Jodie Foster and Terrance Howard.<sup>195</sup> Faced with the prospect of putting her life back together after a brutal assault in which her fiancé was murdered, Foster becomes a vigilante in New York City simply by purchasing a handgun. This is a unique twist on a genre that's been established over the last twenty years, as Foster's character, Erica Bain, had no prior training. This contrasts with films like *A History of Violence* (2005) starring Viggo Mortensen, Liam Neeson's *Taken* franchise (2008, 2012, 2014), and 2021's *Nobody* that stars Bob Odenkirk. These movies feature this same overall trope, where the protagonists go on a spree of righteous violence in response to their families being harmed and/or put in danger. But these films then reveal the protagonists to be former elite weapons experts. Mortensen was a hitman for the mob, Neeson a Green Beret and CIA operative, and Bob Odenkirk an elite assassin. They all exchanged their professional lives for a mundane family existence, but once threatened, they return to their past ways and use a variety of weapons and fighting skills to protect the ones they love. *The Brave One* departs from this in that Foster's character has no prior weapons training. In fact, as a reporter for a radio station in New York City, she's about as far away from a weapons expert as you can get. Through this film, Foster's character presents a roadmap for ordinary citizens when it comes to personal protection. She

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<sup>195</sup> *The Brave One*, directed by Neil Jordan (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2008).

doesn't need any of the training Mortenson, Neeson, or Odenkirk had. All she needs is a handgun, and she's able to exact justice throughout the NYC streets.

*The Brave One* shows how people can become victims of unchecked crime and reinforces the idea that guns are necessary for protection in a crime-riddled 21<sup>st</sup> century. The film begins by introducing Erica (Jodie Foster) and David (Naveen Andrews) as a newly engaged couple. A trio of men brutally assault them in an NYC park because David refused to pay the men for catching the couple's unleashed dog. Erica survives the beating but is in a coma for three weeks. David dies from his injuries. Frustrated with ineffective law enforcement, Erica purchases a gun on the black market. She then kills five criminals before tracking down and executing the three men who murdered her fiancé. Erica receives no punishment for her killings, as the police detective, Mercer (Terrence Howard), who realizes she's the vigilante, ultimately recognizes the good she is doing and lets her go.

There are three scenes that situate Erica as an innocent bystander who uses her gun to keep herself (and others) safe. The first comes shortly after her initial purchase. While Erica is rummaging around in the back of an otherwise empty bodega, we hear the cashier exclaim, "when did you get out." The woman (Ida Combs) is clearly panicking, and an angry male voice yells back that she's not letting him see his kids. The camera shifts to the front of the store and the man (her husband Sandy Combs) pulls out a revolver and shoots Ida three times in the chest. This happens in a matter of seconds, and while Erica is still processing what she's seen from her hidden vantage point, her phone rings. Recognizing there's a potential witness in the store, Sandy begins hunting her. As they stalk each other through the aisles, he taunts her by saying "I can hear you breathing." It's then that Erica fires three times, killing him. In the second scene,

she's sitting in the corner of a mostly-empty subway car. There is a white teenager listening to music, an older black man and his young son, and two black men who are credited as "Thug on Subway," dressed the part in baggy, colorful clothes. For no reason, they begin harassing the teenager, take his iPod, and mock him. The old man admonishes the two, and they turn on him, threatening him and his child. The three victims flee the car at the station, and then the two men notice Erica, who has been sitting quietly in the corner the whole time. After approaching, one puts a knife to her throat and asks if she's "ever been fucked by a knife." She shoots and kills both. In the third scene, while out for a nighttime walk, she comes across a man who has a drugged woman in the backseat of his car. He offers Erica \$50 to have sex with the semi-comatose woman (Chloe), and Erica climbs into the backseat. She then pulls her gun out, forces the man to give all his money to Chloe, and helps the drugged woman out of the car. As they walk away, the man starts his vehicle and tries to run them down. Erica shoots and kills him.

Foster's character grows in her proficiency with handguns, emphasizing no special training is necessary to use one effectively. In the beginning she's lucky, in that at point blank range in the store, she hits Sandy only once, despite firing three shots. On the subway, she hits the two men with all the bullets she fires. In the third scene, she kills the driver with a single shot to the head as the car bears down on her. This evolution, where Erica becomes a crack shot in a matter of days, emphasizes the same type of language found in gun advertisements where the guns practically do the work for the shooter. It's ridiculous (particularly the third scene), but it speaks to a larger narrative that sees guns as a great equalizer.

In these scenes, Erica is responding to violence, but the movie frames her actions as necessary to prevent future crimes. For example, the police would have focused on Sandy Combs

almost immediately, given he was recently released from prison, had an extensive rap sheet (mentioned by the detectives as they begin their investigation) and was involved in a custody battle with the now-deceased Ida. But given Sandy's criminal past, his rage, and how quickly he murdered his wife, it's not a stretch to say he would have been a danger to others had Erica not intervened. While the two subway thugs stole only an iPod, when they approach Erica, they threaten her with grotesque sexual violence. Had Erica not been armed, not only would she have been in grave danger, the men likely would have gone on to harm others. This is reinforced when Detectives Mercer and Vitale arrive at the scene and, once again, offer insight confirming Erica has disposed of the dregs of society, mentioning the two dead men had "a shitload" of priors. The third scene features a sexual predator that, barring Erica's intervention, would have continued assaulting Chloe before eventually disposing of her, only to go on and find another victim. In all these scenes, Erica is not looking for trouble. Trouble finds her, but since she's prepared and carrying a gun, she's able to do what the victims couldn't. These scenes construct a dangerous world, where random violence runs rampant, and the only thing capable of stopping (and preventing) this violence is a prepared individual. The firearms instructor from Shapira and Simon's ethnography essentially asks his students to envision the types of scenarios that play out in this movie.

In *The Brave One*, we see a cinematic manifestation of the logic found in early 21<sup>st</sup> century gun advertisements and concealed-carry courses: good people are in danger and need to prepare themselves accordingly. The NRA's website features an entire section devoted to this with its Armed Citizen page. Here, the gun advocacy group presents monthly updates about crime that was prevented by gunowners. While the exact details vary, typical stories involve the

sorts of crimes featured in *The Brave One*. These representations of violence don't line up with the reality of crime though, something Bader, Baker, Day, and Gordon point out in noting that from 2004 to 2013 "The CDC found that strangers were perpetrators in only 16 percent of all homicides in which women were the victims. The majority are committed by family members, current and former partners and spouses, and friends, acquaintances, and co-workers."<sup>196</sup> *The Brave One* – and protection oriented gun discourse in general – are framed around stranger danger, yet that's not where most crime originates. A product of sensationalist media coverage, Bader et al refer to this as the "law of inverse proportionality," where "media coverage is inversely related to a crime's actual likelihood."<sup>197</sup> Random acts of violence receive substantive coverage because they're unique and rare, but that coverage assists in establishing fear discourses. We see that play out in a very stark way in *The Brave One* where guns become an equalizing force in evening the playing field and preventing criminals from having an unfair advantage.

Visually, *The Brave One* generates fear by utilizing camera work that situates viewers as potential victims. Once Erica's phone rings in the bodega, the audience gets a series of first-person camera shots. The audience sees what Erica sees, establishing this could happen to them. The scene is not shot entirely from this perspective, but once Erica's phone rings, even the non-first-person shots are claustrophobic in nature (we can't see all of Erica or Sandy). This increases the tension, emphasizing the close, dangerous situation Erica faces. In the subway, Erica sits

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<sup>196</sup> Bader, Baker, Day, and Gordon, *Fear Itself*, 99.

<sup>197</sup> Bader, Baker, Day, and Gordon, 99.

quietly in the corner while the harassment takes place, and as the men approach, the camera shifts to viewing the men from below. They loom over the viewer as they approach, just like they loom over Erica. As he asks if Erica has ever been fucked by a knife, the camera shifts to her open blouse, and we get a close up of him licking his knife and then gently running it down her throat and chest. There is a terrifying power discrepancy between Erica and the thugs, yet her gun allows her to overcome it.

Stranger danger fear also requires a logic where law enforcement is ineffective, so citizens need to take their safety into their own hands. In all Erica's violent interactions, she is isolated. It's her, sometimes other victims, and the criminals. Law enforcement is nowhere to be found, and there's a tacit understanding that, had she not been armed, she would have been victimized once again. As the detectives talk about the subway crime scene, they rule out robbery, and Mercer sits down where Erica had been. In literally situating himself in the shooter's shoes, he says:

Look, you got a small guy sitting here, these two punks come at him with a knife, and, you know, he shoots the first one without even getting out of his seat...looks like maybe Mr. Average Joe just decided, 'You know what, I'm not gonna take it anymore, and- and I'm gonna take matters into my own hands.' I mean, the kind of guy you wouldn't even notice.

Here, Mercer suggests the shooter had been victimized in the past, and that there'd been no justice. He knows that, despite their best efforts to enforce the law, things fall through the cracks and police can't be everywhere. In sitting in the place of the shooter and recreating the crime—much like the audience gets Erica's perspective on different occasions—he empathizes with the frustration that law enforcement is often inept and leaves citizens vulnerable to violence.

Mercer himself wrestles with the ethical implications of skirting the legal system when it appears to be catering to criminals. While Erica and her fiancé are in the emergency room,

there's another woman who has just died, a victim of a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Mercer is skeptical she killed herself, and there's a degree of urgency as he tries to speak with the woman's young daughter. Mercer's conversation is cut short by a well-dressed man bursting in, demanding his child back. This man is known only as Murrow, but through the shouting match, it's clear there's a contentious history between him and the detective. We later learn Murrow traffics guns, drugs, and people, and that Detective Mercer has been after him for three years, but Murrow has been able to circumvent the law due to his financial means. Mercer finally convinced Murrow's wife to turn on him, but right before she could testify, she ends up dead. Erica and Mercer develop a friendship after a chance encounter between the two (Mercer has been a longtime fan of Erica's radio show). It's through this friendship that Erica learns of Murrow's continued skirting of the law.

Murrow's storyline serves as a point of departure for Erica's vigilantism, but it also illustrates that citizens are on their own in a variety of contexts. After learning about her detective friend's frustrations, Erica follows Murrow to an empty parking structure and accosts him, demanding he explain why he thinks it's ok to hurt people. Thinking she's part of the media, he flies into a rage, grabs a tire iron, hits her and she falls to the ground. As he looms over her, she punches him, he drops the iron, stumbles back to the railing and says, "You a fucking cop?" To which Erica responds, as she picks up the tire iron and approaches him, "You wish." The next scene is an overhead shot of the two detectives pondering whether the fall or the crowbar in Murrow's skull killed him. While we don't want vigilantes, even this premediated killing (she puts on gloves prior to entering the parking structure) is a product of an inefficient/inept justice system. Erica seeks Murrow out, but only because the justice system has

failed to protect the innocent. Furthermore, he still initiates the physical violence, illustrating what an awful person he is. Here, the film showcases how crime can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it's the product of an unhinged ex-husband, some thugs on a subway, or a sexual deviant in a car, but in other instances, criminals of a much larger type go unpunished because they know how to manipulate the justice system.

Despite turning into a vigilante who seeks out confrontation, the film frames Erica as a reluctant hero, illustrating she's been forced into this role by a society awash in violence. After the bodega shooting, she returns home, rushing to her shower while still clothed, symbolically washing off what she's just done. After the subway, as she's walking away, we get a calm voiceover where she says, "I should have just walked out of that train. I could've just shown them the gun, and they wouldn't have hurt me." As she exits the station, the voiceover continues: "Why don't my hands shake? Why doesn't somebody stop me?" Not only does she lament that someone isn't stopping her, but she becomes physically ill after dispatching the thugs (she throws up in a nearby bar's bathroom). Shapira and Simon recount firearms instructors that repeat this exact mentality: as an instructor points out, there's a "binary between bad guys, dirt bags, and criminals who are bloodthirsty, violent, and immoral, and 'us,' the good guys who carry guns not because we *want* to kill someone, but because we may *have to*."<sup>198</sup> Shapira and Simon find this type of thinking throughout LTC instruction, and it's the type of logic found in *The Brave One*. Those people (dangerous criminals) want to do your body harm and guns are a way to protect yourself.

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<sup>198</sup> Shapira and Simon, "Learning to Need," 12.

*The Brave One* features fear narratives oriented around crime, but it also speaks to a fear of victimization. All the major social safety nets in Erica's life disappear once she's been victimized. Her friends and family disappear, her job is inhospitable, and the system that should be there to help (the police) is some combination of antagonistic/uninterested. Upon returning to work, Erica argues with her boss over when she can go back on air, with the overall gist being that her boss doesn't want to put her back on the radio because she hasn't fully recovered. Erica exclaims, "I just need to keep living. I don't want to disappear." It's this disappearing that resonates throughout the movie, in that, as a victim, Erica faces a gradual disappearance from society. That is, until she buys a gun and can reassert herself as an individual no longer afraid of criminals.

In her first live radio show post-assault, Erica delivers a monologue that embodies the logics found throughout SD fear discourse. Despite stumbling over the introductory line and freezing, Erica delivers an impromptu, from-the-heart monologue that captures the fear that has paralyzed her:

New York. The safest big city in the world. But it is horrible to fear the place you once loved. And to see a street corner you knew so well, and and be afraid of its shadow, to see familiar steps, be unable to climb them. I never understood how people lived with fear. Women afraid to walk home alone. People afraid of white powder in their mailbox, darkness, night. People afraid of people. I always believed that fear belonged to other people, weaker people. It never touched me. And then, it did. And when it touches you, you know that it's been there all along, waiting beneath the surfaces of everything you loved. And your skin crawls, and your heart sickens, and you look at the person you once were walking down that street. And you wonder, will you...will you ever be her again.

Throughout this, the camera features close ups of Erica. It starts with just her lips as she delivers the first lines, but then moves up to just her eyes as she continues. We get occasional shots of the radio station employees and Mercer listening in his car, but the emphasis here is on Erica and

what she's saying. It's an intimate moment between her and her audience, where she reveals the toll victimization has had on her. She's afraid, and while before she viewed the fearful as oddities, now that it's happened to her, she doesn't know how she'll continue. This fear has always been there, but more importantly the threat has always been there. The first four violent scenes (the initial attack, the bodega, subway, and car) were mundane until they weren't. How many times had Erica – and her audience – been in a situation like that and nothing happened? Yet in a moment her entire life was upended. Erica, like many Americans, had been naïve about her safety, and this text serves as a cautionary tale of what can happen to people who are too trusting of strangers.

Physical appearance defines threat in this movie, in that all the criminals have a distinct, “other” look. Furthermore, despite killing eight people, Erica isn't a criminal, a point driven home by the appearances of the different characters. The three thugs who attack Erica and David in the beginning are covered in tattoos, wearing skin-tight tank tops, bandanas/stocking caps, and baggy jeans. Sandy, the bodega shooter has an overall disheveled look: balding but unkempt long hair, a sweat-stained yellow t-shirt that is ripped at the bottom and a maniac appearance reminiscent of Jack Nicholson's famous “here's Johnny” scene from *The Shining*. The two thugs on the subway are both black and dressed in stereotypical gangster fashion, wearing oversized baggy clothes. One is wearing a gold chain and a backwards baseball cap, and the other a do-rag. In the car scene, the man appears grimy and unshaven. As he lights a cigarette we get close-ups of his face, and uneven yellowed teeth. These men are all marked as dangerous strangers through their appearances. In returning to those firearms classes, instructors foreground the importance of being aware of your surroundings. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, yet violence is more likely

to come from someone you know and not the “other” strangers found throughout a movie like *The Brave One*.

In opposition to this is Erica Bain, who in many ways epitomizes what middle class America should aspire to, and it’s this that’s in danger. Erica loves her job and is in it because she’s passionate about the city. Her fiancé, David, is either a nurse or doctor (initially we see him in scrubs, working in a hospital, but his exact role is left open). Both emphasize career-driven people, but for the right reasons. They’re passionate about their work and interested in helping others, not vain and focused on financial success. Erica has refined taste, which we see early on when she attends one of her friend’s art shows. In contrast to the dangerous strangers, Erica is always dressed well, but in an understated manner. She prefers earth tones and slacks, jeans, t-shirts and jackets. Despite never spending much time on her appearance, she’s not grimy/sweaty like Sandy Combs or the car predator. She’s fit and attractive, yet not in a showy way. A marked departure from the black thugs and their look-at-me wardrobes, or even Murrow and his tailored suits. She’s the quintessential NPR reporter living in New York City and embodies the American Dream. It’s all ripped away though because she (and her fiancé) failed to properly protect themselves.

*The Brave One* emphasizes a failure of societal safeguards that leads to the type of tragedy Erica encounters. Law enforcement was nowhere to be found in the initial attack and had failed to address the type of criminality found throughout the city. Furthermore, the police don’t seem all that interested in helping victims. Once out of her coma, the detectives assigned to Erica’s case demand she look through a binder of mugshots, oblivious to the physical and emotional distress she’s in (her face is still severely bruised, and she just recently found out her

fiancé died). In a preview of the cinematography found in the subway scene, Erica is sitting down while the two men stand, looming over her. As the exchange becomes more contentious, one detective says, “We’re the good guys.” To which Erica responds: “Yeah, I know that. So how come it doesn’t feel like that?” and the scene ends. Later, when she goes to inquire about her case, a disinterested officer says the detectives assigned to her case aren’t in, but she can wait and someone will be down to talk with her. As she sits in the waiting room, she overhears the officer repeating the exact same thing to other people: “I realize how difficult it can be, but if you’d please be a little bit patient and have a seat over there, an officer will be down shortly to help you.” The man’s job is little more than poorly-feigned empathy and funneling victims to an ever-growing waiting area. When Erica initially sits down, there is one other person there, but as the officer repeats his platitude, the room continues to fill. Frustrated, Erica leaves and goes to a gun store, determined to protect herself. But even there, she’s thwarted by the legal system, in that she learns there’s a thirty-day waiting period for handguns. Exasperated, she says she won’t survive thirty days, but there’s nothing the salesman can do: that’s the law. While Erica breaks the law in purchasing an illegal handgun on the black market, the movie makes it clear the legal system has failed her at every turn. These fear logics emphasize the danger posed by strangers, yet they also emphasize the societal safety nets that are supposed to protect people are ineffective. Thus, people need to take that responsibility upon themselves.

The NRA’s *Armed Citizen* speaks to these types of fears, in emphasizing random violence that people need protection from. A smattering of headlines illustrates the types of anecdotes these articles recount: “Homeowner shoots and kills armed intruder who kicked down door,” “Man shoots knife-wielding home invader during break-in in Person County, Deputies

say,” and “Woman shoots intruder armed with knife in her Mesa home.”<sup>199</sup> These brief stories then direct readers to various local news agencies that initially reported the stories. The linked stories are seldom more than 200 words, but there really isn’t any need to read more than the headlines, as the message is quite clear. Guns protect people and their property.

One article in particular embodies the type of stranger danger characteristic of this discourse: “A mother waiting outside her 8-year-old daughter’s school was suddenly confronted by two thugs pointing guns at her.” In referencing “thugs,” it codes criminals along racial lines, similar to the Thug on Subway characters from *The Brave One*. So too does it reference that the most innocent of society – mothers – are in danger. Finally, if assaulting mothers isn’t enough, criminal behavior can strike anywhere, even schools. The entirety of the article reads as follows:

A mother was carjacked in broad daylight—surrounded by witnesses and cameras—after pulling in to her 8-year-old daughter’s school. As she waited for her, the woman was suddenly confronted by two young thugs pointing guns at her. She was able to quickly exit the car, but had the foresight to take her purse, which contained her concealed-carry pistol.

The getaway driver, seemingly as inexperienced at driving as the pair was at carjacking, revved the engine a few times in an attempt to drive away, but remained stuck in neutral. Agitated by their mistake, they began firing their guns at the woman multiple times, miraculously missing her. However, the woman managed to access her firearm from her pocketbook and returned fire, hitting one of the ruffians. Police found the vehicle on the side of the road the following day, but it remained in police custody as it contained blood stains from the injured carjacker. The pair remained at large as of this writing.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> “Armed Citizen Stories,” NRA (Institute for Legislative Action), accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.nraila.org/gun-laws/armed-citizen/>.

<sup>200</sup> “A Mother Waiting Outside Her 8-Year-Old Daughter’s School Was Suddenly Confronted by Two Thugs Pointing Guns at Her,” NRA Women (National Rifle Association, July 16, 2021), [https://www.nrawomen.com/content/the-armed-citizen-july-16-2021/?fbclid=IwAR1rQdZz9tKVSAXUKN\\_jQoBZVy4vsSmx5gA290BI6gLw6pyGIjsGNt5DF](https://www.nrawomen.com/content/the-armed-citizen-july-16-2021/?fbclid=IwAR1rQdZz9tKVSAXUKN_jQoBZVy4vsSmx5gA290BI6gLw6pyGIjsGNt5DF)

The NRA's article provides a link to the local news story, and the woman's responses to the event illustrate SD fear logic. She told local reporters, "The first mistake, is they picked the wrong one," and "they definitely didn't expect what they got, and that was for me to shoot back," before going on to claim there is a life lesson we can all learn: "Be aware of your surroundings; be ready at all times."<sup>201</sup>

This story reinforces the idea people can be victims at any time. This happened during the day, but more concerningly, there were witnesses and cameras around. Measures to protect people (the cameras) were ineffective in preventing this carjacking. This mirrors *The Brave One*, in that the institutional safety apparatuses don't work. There is no safe place from the "thugs" and "ruffians" of the world. People must take responsibility for their own safety, as the woman does in returning fire. Yet there's something of a Freudian slip in this story, in that it features guns as retribution, not protection. Guns didn't prevent any violence. In fact, the woman returning fire was an instance of guns adding violence. All the concealed gun accomplished was getting more dangerous projectiles into the environment.

Here, just like in *The Brave One*, criminals possess power because they are some combination of bigger, stronger, and/or armed. They select targets that appear to be easy victims, but guns become an equalizing force. Not only were the criminals in this instance too dumb to drive away, they were also the ones who were injured. While Foster's character never says anything like "they picked the wrong one," that type of thinking is at play throughout the film.

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<sup>201</sup> Jerrita Patterson, "Carjacking Victim: You're a Rookie Carjacker, He Got Stuck in Neutral," WREG.com (WREG.com, May 22, 2021), <https://wreg.com/news/carjacking-victim-youre-a-rookie-carjacker-he-got-stuck-in-neutral/>.

With the exception of the bodega shooter, all the criminals she kills initially view her as weak and someone they can overpower. It's a gun that equalizes and protects Erica.

### Those People Are the Wrong People

Michael Moore's 2002 *Bowling for Columbine* and Comedy Central's 2017 *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns* illustrate the logics of wrong people (WP) fear. Here, texts foreground the ubiquity of guns, to the extent you can obtain one simply by opening a checking account. Additionally, in including sections that focus on the often-warped ideology of militias, these texts generate fear in implicitly asking its audience, if they want guns in the hands of those people. Moore's film connects militias and gun owners to extremism and terrorism by linking a Michigan group he interviews to the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. While Klepper doesn't broach the topic of domestic terrorism in the same way, in introducing his segment on militias by referencing a Southern Poverty Law Center report that cites militias as extremist, he invokes a specter of fear involving extremism and gun violence. Read together, these two texts lay out how WP fear logics dominate left-leaning discourse on gun violence in the US, simplifying it to the extent background checks become a panacea for the crisis.

WP fear establishes that guns are prevalent and easy to get, and as a result, the entire country should fear for its safety. For example, the introductory scene of *Bowling for Columbine* features Moore visiting a Michigan bank where he receives a free gun for opening an account. While Moore goes through a background check (and the bank is a licensed firearm dealer) beginning this way makes the film's goal clear: guns are prevalent to the extent they're given away like mugs and thermoses. Additionally, as Moore fills out the background check, he reads

off one of the questions: “Have you ever been adjudicated mentally defective or have you ever been committed to a mental institution?” He asks about the first part of the question, and the employee says that would involve a crime. Moore then quips, “So if I’m just normally mentally defective but not criminal...” to which the employee laughs along and agrees. Moore is making a play on the idea that even the mentally defective can easily get firearms. It’s subtle, but this idea features into the rest of his film and circulates in other texts.

This introductory scene, along with a subsequent barbershop scene utilize a subtle type of fear in that an audience sees how easy it is to get guns and that being “mentally defective” isn’t by itself a limiting factor. After the movie’s opening credits, we see Moore getting a haircut while still holding his rifle, and he buys ammunition at the same time (the barber shop apparently sells it). The other customers and employees appear somewhat confused at Moore’s behavior, yet no one seems particularly concerned. Moore constructs this scene in a ridiculous manner, and the others in the shop pick up on the absurdity of what he’s doing (no doubt augmented by the fact he has a camera crew recording him), yet the fact this could happen in a store and there are no repercussions speaks to the nature of guns in American society. Despite whatever qualifiers you might offer regarding these scenes as a product of filmmaking, the point resonates. Guns are everywhere and easy to get.

After this opening, Moore interviews members of a Michigan militia, emphasizing the visual nature of dangerous gun owners and connecting them to terrorism. The section begins with footage of men, dressed in military fatigues, shooting assault-style rifles at bowling pins. When Moore asks why they shoot bowling pins, one man responds: “It’s a small target that closely represents the vitals on a human being, should you ever have to shoot at one.” Moore

then narrates that the Oklahoma City bombers, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, had attended this militia's meetings before their April 1995 attack that killed 168 people. As Moore explains this connection, we see footage, not of the bombing or the aftermath, but of militia members firing their weapons. Moore, somewhat sarcastically, says the members want to make it clear they're nothing like McVeigh and Nichols, but the scene is constructed in a way where the connection is unavoidable.

SD fear, as illustrated through *The Brave One*, is predicated on the notion that government institutions can't protect citizens, and thus people are responsible for their own protection. We see this manifest itself in the language of this militia too, with one man saying, "it's an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible. Who's going to defend your kids? The cops? The federal government? It's your job to defend you and yours. If you don't do it, you're in dereliction of duty. As an American. Period." Historians like Carol Anderson<sup>202</sup> and Pamela Haag<sup>203</sup> explain how gun ownership was not part of American identity until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that there's little basis for the type of rhetoric this man is espousing. That's not the entire point though. He's far from the only person to have a misunderstanding of US history. The issue here is that he's misinformed, connected to the OKC bombers, and a proud gun owner who prepares to shoot people by firing at bowling pins. While these militia members aren't the type of "mentally defective" that Moore referenced at the outset,

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<sup>202</sup> Carol Anderson, *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

<sup>203</sup> Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

their behavior (training with guns), along with their conviction presents a concerning portrait of America.

This particular militia created a Military Babes calendar in 2002, which highlights the prevalence of visual stereotypes in identifying dangerous gun owners. This calendar featured female members posing in various stages of military undress while holding guns. As one of the members notes, this was done to combat an unfair societal perception of their group: “we’re not these conspiracy nuts who wouldn’t want our pictures to get out.” Yet, in the documentary, this scene comes immediately after another said anyone who doesn’t own a gun is in “dereliction of duty. As an American. Period.” They disagree with their representation as “conspiracy nuts,” yet seem oblivious to how bizarre their comments sound outside their circle. Woven into this brief calendar scene is a juxtaposition between a distinct lack of sophistication (militia members who think homemade gun-bikini calendars are flattering) and an extreme level of sophistication in terms of the weaponry they’re proudly displaying and using.

The calendar scene shows that gun ownership is familial and genderless, and furthermore, that the potential for danger lies in more than just a handful of men. After we learn about the bikini babes, Moore shifts to an outdoor training environment and interviews a woman (also dressed in camouflage) while she takes care of a small child. Between moments of babytalk with the diaper-clad kid, the woman says, “I felt it was important to be able to protect myself with the best means possible. And one of those means is having a gun.” It’s jarring to watch her shift between comments like this and interacting with her child. The section ends with her asking, “if you’re not going to protect your family, who is?” while the camera focuses on her young child, posing for the camera.

Throughout Moore's film, his subjects routinely refer to gun ownership as a patriotic duty, yet those comments are filtered through a prism that links them to extremism and/or terrorism. This is best illustrated through a prolonged interview with James Nichols, brother of Oklahoma bomber Terry Nichols. The brothers, along with Timothy McVeigh, made bombs on the Nichols's farm before the April 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City. All three were arrested, but James was released, while his brother was sentenced to life in prison and McVeigh executed. In the documentary, James admits he has a plethora of bomb making equipment but says "it's all normal farm stuff." He goes on to mock law enforcement, who he says was scared to search his farm, before quickly explaining their trepidation was born out of slander that came from his ex-wife. It was she, he claims, who told investigators:

I'm a radical, I'm a wild man. I got a gun under every arm, down every leg and every shoe, every corner of the house. You say anything to me, I'll shoot ya. If the people find out how they've been ripped off and...and enslaved in this country by the government, by the powers-to-be...they will revolt, with anger, with merciless anger. There'll be blood running in the streets. When a government turns tyrannical, it is your duty to overthrow it.

James then says he sleeps with a loaded .44 magnum under his pillow, and when Moore challenges him on this, James takes him into his bedroom to show him. The cameraman stays in the hall, but we hear Moore confirm James is telling the truth. Then, Moore concerningly narrates as James puts the loaded gun to his own head as some sort of bizarre joke, all the while laughing at Moore's concern about the safety of the situation. This section ends with James and Moore back at the kitchen table, arguing about gun restrictions and James eventually conceding that weapons-grade plutonium should be restricted because "there's wackos out there." While the initial connection between the Michigan militia and violence exists, there is a degree of separation between their activities and the potential for violence. Here though, we see the brother

of a convicted terrorist proudly proclaim he has all sorts of bomb-making supplies and – with no sense of irony – admit there are “wackos out there.”

In his analysis of the national narrative vacuum the US faced between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror, Pease offers insight into the OKC bombing that’s instructive for understanding WP fear. Pease argues that, since there was no apocalyptic ending to the Cold War, and in fact, George H. Bush initiated what he called a New World Order (the incorporation of the US and its values into a larger global society), the US was left without an external antagonist to define itself by. Out of this, a series of events ended up framing the US government as the new antagonist, one intent on stripping patriotic Americans of their means to defend themselves. Pease cites the 1992 shootout at Ruby Ridge, ID and the 1993 Waco fiasco as contributing to the ideological underpinnings of what Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were trying to do: take revenge on an overreaching federal government. Pease argues that as the country began to learn about the machinations that lead to the Oklahoma bombing, this

brought into visibility a phantom war machine known as the “militia,” comprised mostly of former members of U.S. Special Forces from the Vietnam War, who had formed cells across the country to replace the national security apparatuses that had been dismantled with the break-up of the Soviet Union. Members of the militia represented themselves as patrilinear descendants of the patriots from the epoch of the nation’s founding who felt summoned back into active duty as a result of the state’s imagined violation of the supervisory clause in the founders’ social contract – the promotion of collective security in exchange for the citizens’ submission to governmental rule.<sup>204</sup>

Fueled by far-right talk radio, a variety of bizarre conspiracy theories focusing on government overreach began circulating as well. James Nichols hints at this in his interview with Moore, at one point suggesting to the filmmaker that we still don’t know who blew up the Alfred P. Murrah

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<sup>204</sup> Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 83.

building. While Nichols stops short of saying it was an inside job, he suggests the bombing was meant to keep citizens from recognizing the true danger in the country, the federal government.

One of the hallmarks of fear discourses is how they reference well-established cultural tropes, and WP fear is no different. A perfect understanding of ultra-conservative militia ideology and how it factored into Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Oklahoma City isn't necessary to get scared while watching *Bowling for Columbine*. Aside from that brief narration, Moore never goes into the motivation behind McVeigh and Terry Nichols, but he doesn't have to. Through careful construction of the militia segment and the interview with James, he includes just enough that an audience is left wondering to what extent militia involvement was causal

As the title suggests, *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns*, features Klepper setting out on a project to solve the gun crisis in America.<sup>205</sup> Throughout, Klepper examines why the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms doesn't use computers, looks into a Georgia militia, and in a parody of ABC's *The Bachelor*, selects the moderate gun owner he believes will be open to his anti-gun ideology. Once this fails, Klepper visits Emory University psychology professor Dr. Stephan Hamann, where he learns empathy is an important component of changing opinions. He then has a one-on-one lesson with former US Special Forces operative Patrick McNamara, who now teaches a variety of combat, marksmanship, and self-defense classes. It's here that Klepper realizes most gun owners support things like background checks and waiting lists, but the NRA is such a powerful lobbying entity they have prevented such things from happening. The

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<sup>205</sup> *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns*, directed by Todd G. Bieber (Comedy Central, 2017).

documentary ends with a short feature where Klepper interviews grass roots organizations working to curb gun violence in their own communities.

In building off the specter of gun violence established in texts like *Bowling for Columbine*, Klepper's special presents gun owners as intellectually suspect and dangerous. This, buttressed against subtle reminders of the mass shootings endemic to the US, reminds the country of the danger it faces. For example, Klepper asks a militia member if his rifle is the "the Newtown gun or is that the Aurora gun? Is it the Orlando gun?" Newtown refers to the December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary that left twenty-six people dead. Aurora refers to the July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Colorado shooting at a movie theater that left twelve dead. And Orlando refers to the June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016 shooting at a Florida nightclub that left forty-nine dead. The man responds by simply saying, "No. Similar." Framed as it is, the matter-of-fact way he delivers this response suggests a level of callousness to the deaths of dozens of people. He's aware of these shootings to the extent he can comment on the type of weapon used, yet he offers only two words in response to these tragedies. Brief as it is, in referencing the specter of mass shootings, Klepper connects militias to some of the most visceral and powerful tragedies in American society.

The strongest WP component of this Comedy Central special comes when Klepper visits this Georgia militia. The segment begins with Klepper reading the second amendment, establishing gun violence as a product of a foundational aspect of US society. It's not any type of gun ownership under scrutiny though, it's militias because of the potential they have for violence. Immediately after reading the second amendment, the special cuts to an NBC Today Show snippet focusing on militias: "The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks extremist

groups estimates there were 276 active militias last year, up from 42 in 2008.” Through referencing the SPLC and its emphasis on extremism, gun ownership is linked to terrorism, be it of an Oklahoma City Bombing sort or the lone-wolf style mass shootings of Connecticut, Colorado, and Florida. To further emphasize the danger these groups pose to the country, Klepper then says, “militias are boomin’ and they’re clearly among the biggest proponents of the Second Amendment.” He, along with the viewer, then sets out to learn about militias in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Klepper’s initial step is to search the internet for information regarding militias, and it’s here that we get a troubling introduction to the Georgia Security Force III%. We see a portion of a video<sup>206</sup> where three men, dressed in camouflage and wearing masks, hold AR-style rifles and a large US flag while standing behind a similarly dressed man who reads from a script in his hand: “We the people are bloodthirsty. We the people will have no mercy. We are the predators, you the prey.” It’s a jarring video, reminiscent of the various ISIS and Al-Qaida propaganda recordings that have circulated online, but Comedy Central’s special is not about Islamophobia. It’s a special about gun violence, so it’s not clear to whom these men are directing their threats. It could be anyone.

It’s impossible to know where Comedy Central got this footage and why they decided to show the clip they did, but a little bit of detective work indicates they edited it to so it would generate more fear in a larger group of people. The clip in question is part of an Al Jazeera English documentary titled “Islamophobia in the USA,” and it’s here that the full video is

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<sup>206</sup> In the special, it looks like the video is playing on a screen that looks like the GSF’s webpage, but I can no longer find it there.

available.<sup>207</sup> The original recording begins with the man saying, “This is a message to the cowards who call themselves ISIS,” before going on to talk about being bloodthirsty. It’s addressed to a very specific group of people (ISIS is the prey), yet Comedy Central omits that. Perhaps the initial video Comedy Central found on the GSF website didn’t include this, but it’s clear their leader, Chris Hill, is no fan of Islam. The Anti-Defamation League notes Hill “has often spewed anti-Muslim rhetoric and has also led armed anti-Muslim protests in Georgia.” I find it incredibly difficult to believe Hill would edit out his introduction, where he calls ISIS cowards, for a video they put on their website. I wouldn’t go as far as to say Comedy Central lied in how they introduced this segment, but it is certainly misleading. Granted, it’s a fifty-minute documentary centered on gun violence and expanding on this angle would lead to a barrage of related, but very different topics. And it’s fair to note Comedy Central can’t talk about everything, but in omitting just a few seconds, they emphasize a fear angle that wasn’t initially present. The intent, as it’s presented here, is to intimidate and scare viewers, as it seems like anyone who disagreed with the GSF could be the prey.

In connecting militias to violence, Klepper serves as a handy juxtaposition to what the country needs to fear. This is markedly different from *Bowling for Columbine*, where Moore presents himself as an everyman intent on figuring out what’s going on with guns. Moore fits in with the people he interviews, in wearing some combination of loose-fitting shirts and jackets, along with a baseball cap, and his hair is unkempt and his face unshaven. This is in stark contrast

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<sup>207</sup> Abdullah Elshamy, “Islamophobia in the USA,” Islamophobia | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, May 3, 2017), <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/al-jazeera-world/2017/5/3/islamophobia-in-the-usa>.

with Jordan Klepper, who is clad in a suit and tie throughout. Furthermore, Klepper's styled hair and clean-shaven appearance further denote him (the voice of reason) as distinctly different from the various gun owners he interviews. This is brought into focus greatest when Klepper visits the Georgia Security Force for a weekend training event and sits down for an interview with its leader, Chris Hill (who prefers his codename of General Blood Agent). It's Blood Agent who looks at home, sitting on a lawn chair in the Georgia woods, while Klepper converses, wearing dress shoes, a tie, and a pea coat.

This segment presents the GSF as a combination of delusional and ridiculous, which, in combination with the weapons they have and a specter of gun violence that permeates throughout the US, magnifies SD fear. Blood Agent espouses the same type of rhetoric found in Moore's documentary, saying, "I personally feel like the government has breeched its contract with the people." He goes on to comment on government overreach (limits to the types of guns he can own and the creation of gun-free zones), mirroring the language of James Nichols. Klepper points out this doesn't seem like a valid gripe by asking, "Do you really feel like the government is limiting your access to guns? I mean, I think I tripped over four on the way here." And it's this that gets at the core component of wrong people fear logics: the individuals most devoted to gun use seem most divorced from reality. When Klepper pushes Blood Agent on the need for a fully automatic weapons, the leader responds by saying, "it's to protect myself from harm, and more importantly to protect our country from tyranny. I feel safe knowing there's people like us. That if there's a gunman, and it's not in a gun-free zone, there may be somebody there that can kill the individual that's attempting to harm other people." One of the ideas found throughout concealed-carry classes, and indeed stranger danger rhetoric in general, is that a good guy with a gun is the

best way to stop a bad guy with a gun. In the mind of Blood Agent, had people like the GSF been in Newtown, Aurora, or Orlando, those tragedies could have been avoided. When Klepper says good guys with guns don't seem to stop crime very often, General Blood Agent responds: "Well, I guess that depends on what demographic you're looking at because some people are – talk about it, and some people are gonna be about it." Klepper responds with a quizzical look and a confused "uh huh." It's hard to follow Blood Agent's logic here, but he seems to be suggesting he will be willing to shoot when others won't.

Klepper engages with Blood Agent's fear, but only so far as to expose it and generate a different fear. After the interview, Klepper learns that in the evening the militia will shoot a pig's head that's been stuffed with Tannerite (an explosive). Klepper faces the camera and explains this, and in the background a man, dressed in camouflage, kneels on the ground with the severed head of a pig. As Klepper talks, the man repeatedly jabs a bowie knife up into the head from the neck region to, I imagine, cut out a space to pack the explosive. While this turns into a point of mockery later (it takes multiple tries and hundreds of rounds of ammunition before the head explodes), this illustrates the type of people the country need fear. The leader prefers to be called General Blood Agent, organizes monthly training sessions that in part, involve shooting decapitated animal heads, and has said he's willing to shoot people if he thinks they're harming others. As the evening's festivities begin to get underway, Klepper says "I'm desperate to plant the seed of sanity by any means necessary," but he never does.

Wrong people fear connects the potential for violence with appearances and intimidation. Despite coming across as odd, there's nothing wrong with the Georgia Security Force. If adults want to dress up in camouflage, run around the woods and shoot guns, more power to them.

They seem to show solid gun handling techniques, and they're not breaking any laws. That's not the entirety of their schtick though. There's a degree of intimidation Klepper's special picks up on, emphasized by an exchange he has with two other individuals. He, now wearing his camo suit, narrates: "Though I've adopted their wardrobe choices, it still feels like openly carrying a weapon is less about safety and more about intimidation." As he talks with two GSF members, one of whom seems confused about why Klepper is intimidated, Klepper asks "Do you not think this is at all threatening?" As he does this, the camera zooms in on the man, and travels down his body, where we see military fatigues, six rifle magazines prominently displayed in a tactical belt, and his AR-style rifle. The man disagrees, and the two go back and forth before Klepper admits he's not intimidated in the same way by law enforcement because they have badges. For most, seeing a group of men dressed up like this, walking up and down a street would cause them to go the other direction, yet once again, the men with the guns seem oblivious to this.

Wrong people fear logic asks, in a variety of different ways, if we want guns in the hands of those people. In the *Bachelor* spoof, after saying he's hit it off with some contestants better than others, we cut to a brief scene with one of the contestants, Tim. Frustrated with the language employed by gun critics, Tim says, "I don't like the word assault weapon. Every weapon's an assault weapon. If I wanted to take your life bad enough..." He pulls a pencil out of his pocket and places it on the table between the two and continues: "That is a weapon." Klepper then slides the pencil out of his reach. This is done comedically, but that humor is predicated on the idea gun owners are violent. Furthermore, the premise of the spoof is that Klepper has recruited seven moderate gun owners from his hometown of Kalamazoo MI (one man says his hobbies are

listening to music and model railroads), yet here one of them implies he could kill someone with a pencil if he wanted.

This scene embodies the same type of logic found in Islamophobia discussions, where visual markers are both important, but also useless. As a result, the country needs to be on edge all the time. Tim looks like any other middle-aged white man in the US. He's not wearing camouflage or any type of tactical clothing, and he's not holding a weapon. He looks "normal" (like James Nichols), yet his language is reminiscent of the rhetoric espoused by members of the Georgia Security Force and the Michigan militia. The individuals we've seen up until this point were easy to spot, but this exchange establishes there is no way to tell who an extremist is. Furthermore, as Moore established in *Bowling for Columbine* this isn't something specific to just men: women and kids get involved as well. Devoid of camouflage and assault-type weapons, it becomes difficult to figure out who the extremists are, a scary component that's identical to the paradox of visual representations found throughout Islamophobic discourse.

A wrong people fear discourse that focuses on the connection between terrorists and militias appears to contradict my claim in the last chapter (Islamophobic narratives mask the growing threat of white domestic terrorism). This is contradictory, but it's also a revealing testament to the power of fear and whose fears matter. Very visceral and powerful acts of terrorism shape larger societal narratives, but here we have to wrestle with the fact that, despite popular texts that focus on the connection between gun-wielding extremists and terrorism, this fear discourse doesn't garner the same level of traction that a near identical Islamophobia narrative does. This is a product of how humans build and maintain fear associations in that

white, domestic terrorism fails to become a powerful political tool in the US because the dangerous people look like stereotypical Americans (white and male).

### Background Checks = An Easy Answer

When it comes to politics, this fear discourse manifests itself in the form of debates regarding background checks for firearms purchases. Unsurprisingly, the NRA is firmly and very vocally against them, but background checks have featured into both President Obama and Trump's administrations. In 2016, Obama teared up as he introduced an executive order aimed at broadening the power of background checks.<sup>208</sup> And in 2017, albeit without the fanfare of his predecessor, Trump signed into law legislation that undid Obama regulation that aimed to keep guns out of the hands of the mentally ill.<sup>209</sup> While distinctly different, these actions speak to the prevalence of background checks in the national gun control conversation. Background checks and a waiting period were what set the plot of *The Brave One* into motion as well, and they serve as part of the ending in *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns*. In talking with firearms instructor Patrick McNamara, Klepper has an epiphany that most gun owners support universal background checks. We then see a mashup of recorded footage of all the people he's interviewed saying they support background checks. Even General Blood Agent says he's ok with them. This isn't some

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<sup>208</sup> Eric Lichtblau and Michael D Shear, "Tearful Obama Outlines Steps to Curb Gun Deaths," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 5, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/06/us/politics/obama-gun-control-executive-action.html>.

<sup>209</sup> Merrit Kennedy, "Trump Repeals Rule Designed to Block Gun Sales to Certain Mentally Ill People," *NPR* (NPR, February 28, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/28/517799119/trump-repeals-rule-designed-to-block-gun-sales-to-certain-mentally-ill-people>.

sort of creative editing either: a 2015 Public Policy Polling survey found 72% of NRA members support universal criminal background checks for firearms' sales.<sup>210</sup> Klepper then places the blame on the NRA, and its lobbying efforts on behalf of the firearms industry, as the reason gun control legislation hasn't happened.

The checks themselves are a complicated topic though, let alone how they intersect with the larger fear narrative surrounding gun violence. Historically, gun shows were exempt from requiring criminal background checks. That was officially remedied through legislation in 1993 with the Brady Bill, but people can still skirt the law by classifying themselves as hobbyists instead of firearms dealers. Licensed dealers do have to do a background check regardless of where the sale takes place, but not every person is classified as a licensed dealer (NRA commentary against stricter background checks uses the phrase "licensed dealer" for this reason). Thus, private individuals can sell guns without doing background checks. From what I can tell, this is what Klepper means when he refers to universal background checks, though he and that survey aren't entirely clear.

We shouldn't let the perfect be the enemy of the good, but this emphasis on background checks is misleading and speaks to the way fear has coopted the gun control debate in the US. While this is a positive way to build to an ending where Klepper interviews people working on grassroots projects to curb gun violence in their communities, it's nevertheless a simple approach to a very complicated issue. For example, suicides, mass shootings, and gang-related gun

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<sup>210</sup> "Release: Gun Owners Overwhelmingly Support Background Checks, See NRA as out of Touch, New Poll Finds," Center for American Progress, November 17, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release-gun-owners-overwhelmingly-support-background-checks-see-nra-as-out-of-touch-new-poll-finds/>.

violence are substantially different from each other, yet they're lumped into the overall topic of gun violence when people trot out statistics about gun-related fatalities. Social scientist Gary Kleck finds that when it comes to lethality in suicides, hanging and guns are about equal, so focusing on getting guns out of the hands of at-risk people (while a good idea) isn't a cure-all, as it's impossible to get rid of all the things necessary to commit suicide by hanging.<sup>211</sup> A 2018 report from the *New York Times* found that "a vast majority of guns used in 19 recent mass shootings were bought legally and with a federal background check. At least nine gunmen had criminal histories or documented mental health problems that did not prevent them from obtaining their weapons."<sup>212</sup> Most of the recent high-profile mass shootings have been perpetrated by people who had followed the laws in purchasing guns and had, in fact, passed background checks (in certain cases multiple times). In "Understanding the illicit gun market in Los Angeles: A review of the empirical evidence," sociologists George E. Tita and Melissa Barragan explain that the available evidence regarding criminals' acquisition of guns finds that most (upwards of 70%) obtained firearms through informal social connections, like a friend or family member.<sup>213</sup> While they don't mention background checks here, given what they present, I

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<sup>211</sup> Gary Kleck, "The Effect of Firearms on Suicide," in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Harel Shapira, and Kristin A. Goss (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 309-329, 326.

<sup>212</sup> Larry Buchanan et al., "How They Got Their Guns," *New York Times* (New York Times, February 16, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/03/us/how-mass-shooters-got-their-guns.html>.

<sup>213</sup> George E. Tita and Melissa Barragan, "Understanding the Illicit Gun Market in Los Angeles: a Review of the Empirical Evidence," in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Harel Shapira, and Kristin A. Goss (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 75-94, 81.

find it unlikely universal background checks would have stopped these transactions. Tita and Barragan bring up interventions that focus on the demand-side part of the problem, writing “Chicago’s Becoming a Man (BAM) program, for example, was able to reduce violent crime arrests among youth in the target neighborhoods by nearly 44%” They go on to note these types of programs vary across cities but that “many have proven to reduce gun violence at the neighborhood level, as well as gun offending at the individual level.”<sup>214</sup> Klepper’s special ends on a positive note, and universal background checks would be a step in the right direction, but we can’t let calls for background checks obscure the more concerning issue of why people pick up guns and resort to violence in the first place. Furthermore, there are an estimated 400 million guns circulating throughout the US: if someone wants a gun, the sad reality is they’re available.

An August 2019 special article for the *Annals of Internal Medicine* that focuses on gun violence illustrates this conundrum in emphasizing the need for background checks along with seriously examining health-related issues. Titled “Firearm-Related Injury and Death in the United States: A Call to Action From the Nation’s Leading Physician and Public Health Professional Organizations,” the authors write “We, the leadership of 6 of the nation’s largest physician professional societies, whose membership include 731,000 U.S. physicians, reiterate our commitment to finding solutions and call for policies to reduce firearm injuries and deaths.”<sup>215</sup> They reference eight options they believe will address the deaths in America: background checks for firearm purchases and transfers, more robust research into firearm injury

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<sup>214</sup> Tita and Barragan, 90.

<sup>215</sup> Robert M. McLean et al., “Firearm-Related Injury and Death in the United States: A Call to Action from the Nation’s Leading Physician and Public Health Professional Organizations,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 171, no. 8 (July 2019): pp. 573-578, 573.

and death, prohibiting firearm ownership for those adjudicated guilty of intimate partner violence, safe storage of firearms, improved access to mental health care, implementation of extreme risk protection orders (allowing a judge, in certain circumstances, to order firearms removed from an individual's possession), the elimination of state and local mandates that limit what a medical professional can say regarding gun ownership and health, and a ban on high-capacity magazines and firearms. Despite beginning with a call for background checks, six out of the next seven recommendations focus on people's behavior.

It's important to remember US cultural texts – of all sorts – are awash with fear narratives surrounding gun violence. Furthermore, as Benjamin Jr. and Bushman argued in “The Weapons Priming Effect,” the mere presence of weapons tends to increase aggression in humans. This is a fear discourse that, more than most, seems to play to all the negative components of human physiology, and we need to be aware of that as we interact with texts involving gun violence in the US. The *Annals of Internal Medicine* article speaks to the power of fear, in referencing the psychological impact mass shootings (a tiny percentage of overall gun injuries and deaths) have on the country: “mass shootings create a sense of vulnerability for everyone, that nowhere – no place of worship, no school, no store, no home, no public gathering place, no place of employment – is safe from becoming the venue of a mass shooting.”<sup>216</sup> We need to be aware of how this impacts our discussions as we move forward and try to address gun violence in the US.

I'm beginning to sound like the people I argue with on Twitter and Facebook who are quick to point out guns don't kill people, people kill people. It's hard to express how

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<sup>216</sup> McLean et al, 573.

uncomfortable this makes me, yet I think the sentiment is backed up by the limited evidence out there. And indeed, almost every academic article involving gun violence that I've read makes a point to reference how difficult it is to get funding for research on guns and how limited the existing data are. The premise of this dissertation has been to engage with what happens to large-scale societal conversations when fear is a dominant part of the narrative. It's easy to criticize Islamophobic narratives because those are often the product of politically or culturally conservative circles. Fear is rendering those people's conversations superficial. That's easier to accept than turning the same gaze on my own beliefs. Yet this is a necessary step if we accept that fear plays upon human physiology in a way where people have limited control over how fear affects their thinking and behavior. I am someone who is concerned about gun violence in the US, and gun discourse is fraught with fear narratives. What is it masking then? What don't I see because I'm so caught up in the fear narratives of guns? The answer, I think, is that the complicated topic of gun violence ends up being reduced to simplistic for and against narratives regarding background checks.

## EPILOGUE: FROM IDAHO TO WASHINGTON DC

While the previous chapters lay out how fear circulates throughout US cultural realms, I end with an examination of January 6<sup>th</sup> because it serves as an embodiment of what 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fear looks like. This isn't how I originally planned to finish though. Initially, I wanted to end with a chapter devoted to Donald Trump because not only is he a perfect figure to examine how fear circulates throughout US culture, he's also a great vehicle to add an important qualifier to my overall analysis of fear. Despite emphasizing at the outset that rational/irrational are flawed descriptors when talking about fear, I couldn't shake the notion my analysis implied conservative people were somehow dumb and had been duped into being scared. That's not how fear works, and to account for this, I wanted to end with an analysis of the fear circulating throughout coverage of President Trump. While Trump certainly has conservative critics, many are left-leaning intellectuals who I agree with and respect a great deal (I still have some Tweets saved from historian Kevin Kruse, the author of one of the books I cite in this section). I wanted to emphasize it's not just the people across the political aisle that, intentionally or unintentionally, deploy fear tropes to further their goals (chapter 4 does this to a certain extent, but analyzing guns isn't as politically contentious as analyzing Donald Trump). My proto-thesis was that, in castigating Trump and his supporters as a danger to the country, a lot of people were ignoring that American history is replete with examples of politicians enacting awful policies while smiling and singing the praises of democracy, equality, and freedom for all. In effect then, Trump's great sin was saying the silent part out loud. While it would be hard for me to convey just how much disdain I have for the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, I thought a lot of the

criticism directed his way was betraying the fact American citizens just want leaders who say pretty things, regardless of the policies they put in place.

I don't know to what extent I would still think this if I'd have spent several months researching and writing on it because on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a mob of Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol, intent on disrupting the certification process of the presidential electors. This really disrupted my idea about Donald Trump, as an attempted insurrection is a major concern. I'm not a historian, but one of the prominent analytical tools found throughout my analysis of fear is looking to see if these fears have been issues in the past. This is the argument that runs throughout "The Technological Apocalypse," and is born out of the dirty-house metaphor, a heuristic from folklorists that says taboo societal things are best thought of as "dirt" that taints a clean cultural house. The reality though, is that when you start unpacking what is believed to be clean, you often find things weren't as they were initially portrayed. In the case of Donald Trump, when you start going back and looking at the country's history, it becomes apparent a lot of politicians used golden language to enact awful policy. For me though, all of this changed on January 6<sup>th</sup>, in that we now had a very distinct, unique event that was a product of Trump's demagoguery.

I watched the day's events unfold on television with a mixture of concern and interest. It was surreal and reminded me of the images I saw on Al Jazeera while I was living in Syria, watching the Arab Spring unfold throughout the Middle East. The biggest thing that resonated with me was an overall image of chaos: a mob struggling against (and defeating) uniformed security. Despite an uncanny similarity between the two, almost exactly a decade apart, this seemed more concerning. Obviously, I'm a citizen of this country, which is markedly different

from the two years I spent in Syria on a work VISA. Yet I think there was something else at play that gets at a persistent thread of American exceptionalism. The intellectual in me knows there isn't anything inherently superior about the people who make up the US (I've ended just about every graduate class I've ever taken thoroughly depressed, unable to wrap my head around why people are such assholes to each other), so why should I be scared about something playing out in the US that I witnessed while living in Damascus a decade earlier? The answer, I think, stems from a belief I had involving civil unrest. Mobs have stormed capitals throughout history, and government functionaries have had to flee to safety, but that's something that happened over there, in other countries. Yes, the US has all sorts of problems with any number of different aspects of its society, but it's not at risk of falling into chaos. January 6<sup>th</sup> really challenges that belief.

The concerning thing about Donald Trump isn't him as a person or politician, it's that millions of people support him. When he's out of office, the forces that got him elected will remain. And indeed, that has held true throughout the beginning of Biden's presidency. The focus needs to be on why people gravitate towards a figure like Donald Trump, not the individual himself. This holds true even more when we start talking about January 6<sup>th</sup>. While the day's events were ostensibly about the election, if we look closer, we see myriad fear narratives circulating. Examining January 6<sup>th</sup> by focusing just on what happened regarding election falsities is the same as treating just Trump the politician and not the beliefs and ideas that so many throughout the country seem to support.

January 6<sup>th</sup> presents a cornucopia of fear logics, many of which I've devoted substantial time to in previous chapters. The rioters themselves relied on familiar fear tropes in espousing

the type of rhetoric found throughout stranger danger (SD) gun discourse: the government is some combination of incompetent and malevolent. So too did the coverage tap into wrong people (WP) rhetoric: many of the rioters were dressed like militia, suggesting the people with guns are intent on overthrowing democracy. Social media played a major factor, with media platforms like Facebook and Twitter circulating misinformation about the presidential election (to the extent Trump's Twitter account was eventually deactivated). Yet once again, we should be focusing on why people gravitated to those Tweets and the misinformation they contained instead of blaming the platform for creating a toxic environment. The narrative the rioters bought into the most (the election had been stolen) gained traction because it fit into a well-established trope of US conservatism that views itself as being under attack. While not a major point of emphasis in chapter 4, this idea is on the periphery of SD logic. We see figures like James Nichols and General Blood Agent espousing the need for weapons so they can maintain their "free" way of living. American Islamophobia, while the quintessential fear discourse to examine the interplay of biology and culture, initially seems divorced from January 6<sup>th</sup>. After all, the people storming the Capitol were doing so because they believed their politicians had been cheated out of a victory. Yet in examining discourse surrounding refugees, we see how a fear of Muslim refugees fits into that larger narrative of American values being under attack. All of these fear logics circulate throughout January 6<sup>th</sup> discourse, either in terms of its media coverage or as a contributing factor to the events themselves.

Before getting to the nation's capital though, we need to take a detour to Twin Falls Idaho to examine an inflammatory news story that serves as a case study for how well-cultivated fears can turn a nondescript event into a city-wide panic. In 2016, a friend of mine from Twin

Falls linked an article on Facebook from Drudge Report titled “REPORT: Syrian ‘Refugees’ Rape Little Girl at Knifepoint in Idaho.” The exact article has disappeared into cyber space, but Caitlin Dickerson’s article, “How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down,” chronicles the events that transpired over roughly a year.<sup>217</sup> Dickerson relies heavily on a local Twin Falls reporter, Nathan Brown, who covered this story from the beginning. At a sparsely attended city council meeting, Terry Edwards (whom Brown recognized as someone who, in the past, had tried to shut down the city’s refugee resettlement program) came before the council with questions about “an alleged assault of a minor child and we can’t get any information on it. Apparently, it’s been indicated that the perpetrators were foreign Muslim youth who did this – I guess it was a rape.” Through his contacts, over a few days, Brown is able to piece together the following:

three children had been discovered partly clothed inside a shared laundry room at the apartment complex where they lived. There were two boys, a 7-year-old and a 10-year-old, and a 5-year-old girl. The 7-year-old boy was accused of attempting some kind of sex act with the 5-year-old, and the 10-year-old had used a cellphone borrowed from his older brother to record it. The girl was American and, like most people in Twin Falls, white. The boys were refugees.

In the rest of Dickerson’s article, she charts how that initial city council meeting turned into a firestorm that involved national media and lead to, amongst other things, the Twin Falls mayor shutting down his Twitter account, his wife receiving death/rape threats, and the local paper enlisting the help of the FBI to sift through their various threats.

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<sup>217</sup> Caitlin Dickerson, “How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down,” The New York Times (The New York Times, September 26, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/magazine/how-fake-news-turned-a-small-town-upside-down.html>.

Dickerson never explicitly says this is a product of social media, but her reporting falls into familiar technophobia tropes in laying the blame on new media platforms. As illustrated in chapter 2, this comes about in subtle ways, like how she includes Brown's recollection that in a matter of days, far-right "reports" began circulating on Facebook: "articles that said that the little girl had been gang raped at knife point, that the perpetrators were Syrian refugees and that their fathers had celebrated with them afterwards by giving them high fives. The stories also claimed that the City Council and the police department were conspiring to bury the crimes." Dickerson also references a handful of large-platform figures involved in the spread of wanton misinformation, most notably conservative pundit Ann Coulter and Stephen Bannon, the founder of Breitbart. Breitbart isn't social media in the same way Twitter or Instagram are, but the comments sections that are at the bottom of those articles further the far-right ideology Bannon is known for. Furthermore, the words and arguments of those figures circulate rapidly, once again implying social media is responsible for this mess. The title of Dickerson's article, and an emphasis on the circulation of misinformation fits in with a larger fear discourse about the ills of social media too; it's these new media platforms that "turned a small town upside down." That's only a partial truth though, for the inflammatory reports themselves depend on Islamophobic tropes that predate social media. This particular panic is born out of how humans build fear associations, along with ubiquitous tropes that imply any individual who "looks" like a Muslim/Arab could be dangerous. Twin Falls was primed for a powerful fear response where people read an article where a father high-fived his sons after they raped a little girl, and rather

than questioning the veracity of such a sensationalist story, react in outrage. The online articles were the match that lit the fire, not the reason for the conflagration.<sup>218</sup>

It's a long ways from Twin Falls in 2016 to Washington DC in 2021, but this Idaho story, and the outrage surrounding it, fits in with a larger conservative fear about "American" values being under attack. In *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974*, Kevin Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer argue the country has become further divided along economic, racial, political, and gender/sexuality lines that are demarcated by conservative and liberal thought. They write that "while some observers try to pinpoint 'the' single source of division in America today, we find that there were multiple forces transforming the nation in these decades."<sup>219</sup> They pick up on fear circulating throughout American political and social conservatism in the last several decades, noting "for many conservative Christians, the campaigns for feminism and gay rights in the 1970s had represented a direct threat to what they understood as the 'traditional' heterosexual nuclear family."<sup>220</sup> This notion of fundamental values being under attack circulates on the periphery of Dickerson's article too. As she chronicles, conflict throughout the Middle East and North Africa has led to an increase in the number of "refugees with darker skin who follow an

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<sup>218</sup> Only a few people know what happened in that laundry room, given that records involving minors are sealed, but the polemical language found in those circulated reports wasn't accurate. A crime did happen, and the perpetrators pled guilty in juvenile court, but in terms of the inflammatory rhetoric circulated throughout conservative media spheres? As Dickerson discovered, the lead investigator J.R. Paredez said, "100 percent false, like not even close to being accurate."

<sup>219</sup> Kevin Michael Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 5.

<sup>220</sup> Kruse and Zelizer, 89.

unfamiliar religion” ending up in the largely white Twin Falls. A point Matt Christensen, then-editor of the Twin Falls *Time-News*, mentioned in saying, “there are a lot of people who feel like society is changing too quickly, like the community is changing too quickly. And who view other people not like them or who don’t speak their language as a threat or a sign their culture is going to be weakened. And they want to do what they can to stop that.” This is the type of assault Kruse and Zelizer recognize. Read this way, the Idaho fiasco is a story about multiple fear narratives coalescing around (and dictating) coverage of a concerning crime. However, in terms of how Dickerson presents it, all of those components take a back seat to a fear logic that places the blame at the feet of social media. After all, Dickerson’s article is titled “How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down,” not “Global Geopolitics Shape Small Town Response to Sex Crime.”

Dickerson misses an opportunity to examine why those reports garnered such outrage in Twin Falls and throughout the country. The local bigotry that began the ordeal finds its roots in Islamophobic fear narratives that deal with biology and representations in media. The national response (Bannon sent his lead Breitbart investigative reporter to Twin Falls) relied on an overarching logic that says conservative life is under attack. While Dickerson ends with an anecdote from the editor talking about the appearance of massive societal change, she focuses more on how “on a national scale, an ascendant network of anti-Muslim activists and provocateurs has exploited the fears brought on by these changes, finding a platform and a receptive audience online.” It’s easier to critique their ascendancy than it is to examine how that ascendancy relies on accepted Islamophobic narratives that are found throughout major Hollywood movies and political discourse. On one level, this Twin Falls story highlights how a

variety of fear logics work together to contribute to public outrage, but on another it's useful for investigating an even bigger event, that of the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot.

The events in Washington DC weren't just about allegations the government had stolen the election from the American people, just like a story from a small town in southern Idaho wasn't just about anti-refugee sentiment. Both illustrate the need to examine the big picture and identify the different types of fear circulating throughout the country at the time. It wasn't just that a group of ardent Trump supporters fell victim to their leader's particular brand of fear-based demagoguery. While that absolutely played a role, the bigger issue is that American lives have become governed by fear to the extent people believe a conspiracy that said multiple states conspired to cheat Donald Trump – and Donald Trump alone – out of victory on election night. The claims, endorsed by Trump himself and circulated throughout Twitter and Facebook ranged from accusations about voting systems being manipulated to insistence that illegal immigrants (and dead people) had voted in droves to ensure a Biden victory. It's a ridiculous claim, and the amount of bipartisan fact-checking that's been done to show it's a ludicrous conspiracy is massive, yet people still believe Trump was cheated. We should be concerned about how these falsehoods circulate, but we should be concerned more about why people gravitated towards them.

It's fear. The answer is fear. A country awash in fear is a country loaded with stress and resistant to empirical evidence, and given the ubiquity of fear narratives of all types, there's little chance any one fear narrative, like the election being stolen from Trump (another instance of conservative life being under attack) is ever going to disappear.

Once again though, it's not just on the fringes of right-leaning political discourse that we find fear narratives. In July of 2021 the New York Times released a documentary about the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot that is a story of fear, both in terms of what it analyzes and how it goes about that analysis.<sup>221</sup> *A Day of Rage: An In-Depth Look at How a Mob Stormed the Capitol* is a collection of footage shot by rioters, police bodycams, and law enforcement audio communication. At the outset of the forty-minute film, the narrator tacitly acknowledges the role fear will play in the retelling of the day's events: "Our reconstruction shows the Capitol riot for what it was, a violent assault encouraged by the president." We then receive a reconstruction of the day's events that begins with the Stop the Steal rally and then follows rioters as they move towards the Capitol building. Once the mob arrives, they confront an outnumbered and ill-prepared security force before breaking the lines, storming the building, and disrupting the certification process. Throughout all of this, a narrator explains what is happening, emphasizing how close the mob was to confronting members of congress. And while he doesn't explicitly say it, the implication is the nation (and democracy) was a handful of feet away from a frenzied mob getting a hold of US congresspeople and doing irreparable harm to them and our country.

This film emphasizes the danger congress (and by extension democracy) faced due to the military nature of the rioters. The narrator acknowledges most who attended the initial rally were "ordinary citizens who believe Trump's lie that the election was stolen" but this comment only magnifies the danger, as the ordinary citizens quickly get lost in the scrum that includes more

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<sup>221</sup> *A Day of Rage: An In-Depth Look at How a Mob Stormed the Capitol*, *The New York Times* (The New York Times, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007606996/capitol-riot-trump-supporters.html>.

militarized individuals. The documentary references QAnon, the Proudboys, and the Oathkeepers, all defined through various types of violence. As the narrator explains the QAnon conspiracy theory, we see numerous social media screen captures that feature QAnoners encouraging violence at the rally and imploring attendees to bring weapons. We're briefly introduced to the Proud Boys, "Far-right nationalists who flashed white power signs throughout the day...they have a history of street violence and will be key instigators of the riot." Most notably though, are the Oath Keepers, who resemble the militias found in *Bowling for Columbine* and *Jordan Klepper Solves Guns*. As they're introduced, their leader claims to have men stationed throughout Washington DC. Then a series of images shows their preparation while the narrator says, "Their leader has said the group is ready to follow Trump's orders and take members of what they call the 'Deep State' into custody. They're organized, staging their military-style equipment on the ground. And later, they put on body armor, talk on radios." This is the logic behind WP fear discourse. Even though there were very few rioters with guns, the Oath Keepers, as a whole, looked like the individuals featured throughout this fear discourse, and now they're trying to overthrow a free and fair election.

*A Day of Rage* generates fear by emphasizing the danger these extremist groups pose. Throughout the documentary, often in shaky, first-person video, we see and hear frenzied rioters scream things like "This is what we came for!" as they break through outside police barricades and "I can't believe this is reality. We accomplished this shit" once they get into the building itself. So too do we get chilling moments of the mob moving through the Capitol building chanting "Nancy," in reference to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, a frequent target of right-wing vitriol. The Nancy chant is particularly disturbing, and at various times, we also hear chants

of “whose house? Our house.” Both carry menacing and threatening undertones. While they were quickly dispersed once the national guard arrived, one of the scary components here is that certain groups were organized and appeared to have military training – and to a certain extent were successful.

In this documentary, we also see rioters espousing the type of under-attack rhetoric Kruse and Zelizer noted. Reminiscent of the bizarre comments Jordan Klepper heard in interviewing members of the Georgia Security Force, the audience is left aghast at how disconnected from reality these rioters appear. *A Day of Rage* begins with a montage of people travelling to, and arriving in, Washington DC. While these images play, a group of people on a bus recite the pledge of allegiance, and the effect is cult-like. Once they finish, the narrator speaks for the first time, saying “They came from all 50 states, out of some sense of patriotic duty,” and we get a closeup of one attendee saying it’s not just a rally for President Trump, “it’s really rallying for our way of life. The American dream, against fake news.” At the outset, this film makes it clear people came from all over the country intent on defending their way of life. Then, what follows is a visceral account of the chaos and violence several of them gleefully participated in.

The film builds on this in its ending, implying it’s only a matter of time until something like this happens again. After referencing the political bickering and fighting that followed the riot, the narrator says:

None of what happened on January 6<sup>th</sup> would have been possible without a huge mass of ordinary people who were proud of what they achieved. Millions around the country still believe the violence was not only justified, but necessary. And the forces that brought them there have not gone away.

After this, we cut to a scene captured sometime in the evening of January 6<sup>th</sup>. It’s dark and the national guard, amongst other entities, has restored order. A protestor speaks at a wall of shielded

guardsmen: “Yeah, the patriots are coming back, y’all. Hopefully, y’all will be on our side when that happens.” This is the final image of the documentary. *A Day of Rage* has now conveyed the following: a lot of people believe their way of life is under attack, some are willing to violently attack those who resist, and this is going to happen again. The narrator acknowledges there were multiple forces that brought people to Washington DC, but he doesn’t examine them. Instead, the documentary focuses on how dangerous the situation is.

### Permanent Panics and Fear

In thinking about the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, it’s worth revisiting two works that, while different from my overall analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century fear, still offer insight into my argument. The first is a 1964 essay by Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” and the second is Stanley Cohen’s 1972 *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*. Both texts hold relevance decades later, in that Hofstadter’s essay received new circulation as critics tried to make sense of Donald Trump’s rise to political power, and there are parallels between Cohen’s work and a number of events I’ve chronicled throughout this dissertation.

In focusing on the particular style of paranoia that circulates throughout US political culture, Hofstadter begins by writing, “American politics has often been an arena for angry minds.”<sup>222</sup> In the rest of his essay, he charts how this style (defined by conspiracy theories that say high-ranking political figures are working to destroy the country from within) defined anti Illuminism, Mason, Jesuit, and Communist eras in the United States. In effect, Hofstadter is

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<sup>222</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper's Magazine*, November, 1964. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

looking at the political landscape of 1960s America and trying to understand how small groups gain massive political and social power.

Hofstadter picks up on an idea that anticipates the work of historians like Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer when he writes, “the modern right wing, as Daniel Bell has put it, feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.” There were certainly differences between the different eras Hofstadter chronicles, but what has been consistent is the way all those camps framed the country as being under attack through subterfuge. It was, at varying times, the Illuminati, Masons, Jesuits, or Communists that were responsible for taking the country away from the “real” patriotic Americans. In closing, Hofstadter writes:

This glimpse across a long span of time emboldens me to make the conjecture – it is no more than that – that a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population. But certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties.

The fact that one of the US’s major political parties seems unable to divorce itself from a conspiracy-spewing figure in Donald Trump suggests it’s not a “modest minority of the population” that’s infected with this anymore. Overall all though, I agree with the point he’s making but would add an important caveat that’s instructive for thinking about Hofstadter work and my ideas of fear. Traditions, structures, inheritances, catastrophes, and frustrations cultivate conspiracy-laden thinking, but they do so today because of the impact fear, as a source of chronic stress, has on people. There’s nothing wrong with Hofstadter’s argument per se, but it falls into the type of trap humanities scholars frequently encounter. Their analysis of a phenomenon is

great, but they don't spend time exploring why those particular things are so appealing. Here, a paranoid style and fear go hand-in-hand, in that fear discourses often include conspiracies. I haven't spent much time delving into conspiracy theories, but they are present in fear discourses. For instance, the constant obsession with Barack Obama's connection to Islam mirrors the idea of internal sabotage Hofstadter referenced throughout. So too do some of the most ardent supporters of gun rights traffic in an idea that the government is secretly working against them. Even the language of George W. Bush's Axis of Evil speech includes conspiratorial elements, in that he introduced the idea that terrorist cells were lurking throughout American communities. In short, we shouldn't be discounting anything found in Hofstadter's essay, but we should be asking why something like a paranoid style garners such political, social, and cultural power.

In 1972, Stanley Cohen published *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*, a text that informs some of the components of fear theory but is most useful, I think, because it forces us to examine the morality of fear. The specifics of Cohen's argument aren't all that relevant to my understanding of fear. For instance, in focusing on the Mods and Rockers of 1960s England, Cohen charts how "society labels rule-breakers as belonging to certain deviant groups and how, once the person is thus type cast, his acts are interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned."<sup>223</sup> It's possible to draw parallels between that and some of the things I've argued thus far (the argument lurking below the Obama-as-Muslim discourse is one that, like John McCain did, views Islam as deviant and detrimental to the fabric of the country). That said, aside

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<sup>223</sup> Cohen, 4.

from the questions of the morality of fear (which I'll get into momentarily), the parallels between Cohen's work and mine are, overall, a stretch.

The main area of analysis for Cohen is the mass media, and I worry thinking about the media in this way would be detrimental to understanding fear. Cohen clearly states this at the outset, writing, "Much of this study will be devoted to understanding the roles of the mass media in creating moral panics and folk devils."<sup>224</sup> In 1972 this made sense, but fifty years later, the media landscape has changed to the extent the term "mass media" – as the definitive sculptor of societal thought – doesn't apply. Certainly, it would be possible to update this for fear and argue media entities affect thought, (and I do this throughout my analysis). I worry though, that this could quickly turn into an analysis that switches "mass" for "social." Despite being appealing (and texts like *The Social Dilemma* do just this), this argument would fall into the trap I wanted to avoid when it comes to digital spaces. Social media contributes to any number of different fear logics, but it, by itself, isn't causing them.

At a larger level though, I'm hesitant to lend Cohen too much credence because introducing "moral panic" into Fear Theory would steer the discussion towards questions of rationality. Cohen doesn't investigate the psychology and neurology of panics in the same way I analyze fear, but a point he makes about the word's connotations is relevant. He writes, "the term is unfortunate, though, because of its connotation with irrationality and being out of control."<sup>225</sup> Cohen goes on to argue that parts of British society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were

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<sup>224</sup> Cohen, 11.

<sup>225</sup> Cohen xxxiii.

indeed panics, despite them not being entirely irrational and out of control. Connotations aside, thinking about things like the Mods and Rockers as a moral panic is still a useful descriptor. The point Cohen makes about “panic” resonates with my overall idea about fear being neither rational nor irrational. However, even with a disclaimer like Cohen offers in writing, “calling something a ‘moral panic’ does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful,”<sup>226</sup> I think introducing terminology like “moral panic” into an analysis of fear discourses would do more harm than good.

Cohen’s thoughts regarding the morality of critiquing societal panics are still relevant for thinking about fear. In an updated 2002 preface for his book, Cohen reflects on a troubling nature of panic discourse: “The concept of moral panic evokes some unease, especially about its own morality. Why is the reaction to Phenomenon A dismissed or downgraded by being described as ‘another moral panic,’ while the putatively more significant Phenomenon B is ignored, and not even made a candidate for moral signification?”<sup>227</sup> In a lot of places, I end up doing this, in that I’m effectively arguing certain fears aren’t warranted but others are. In part, I’ve ignored entering into this discussion overtly because it doesn’t pertain to the bigger argument I make: it’s the impact of fear on society that matters, not whether those fears are truly warranted. I have tried not to turn this into a fact-checking dissertation, as I’m not all that interested in proving certain fears are warranted and certain fears aren’t. After all, the premise of *Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup>*

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<sup>226</sup> Cohen, vii.

<sup>227</sup> Cohen, xxvi.

*Century* is that fear is something that is both outside the realm of human control and something people can control. Fact checking would, I believe, result in implying that providing the correct information would fix these issues. Things aren't that simple though, as people routinely ignore facts because they counter what they believe, a product of how they feel. This was the premise behind Ioanide's *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment*, and Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Despite this, a comparative framework is inevitable to a certain degree, given that my argument is that certain fear logics grow to dominate cultural discussions which in turn function as a net-negative for society. That unease Cohen notes is reflective in that I both try to avoid fact-checking fear discourses and inevitably end up having to do so in certain cases.

Cohen references the seemingly-paradoxical phrase "permanent moral panic," which is a fitting way to think about fear, and a good example of how my work builds upon some of his ideas. In addressing criticism his book initially received, Cohen writes "the notion of a 'permanent moral panic' is less an exaggeration than an oxymoron. A panic, by definition, is self-limiting, temporary and spasmodic, a splutter of rage which burns itself out."<sup>228</sup> Here, Cohen responds to critics who have argued moral panics (in the 90s) were becoming so frequent that referring to them as panics was an outdated way to approach them. As a sociologist trying to change how his field views criminality, Cohen is writing a very esoteric text that needs to focus on definitional arguments. I can't comment one way or the other on the larger institutional sociological argument Cohen makes, but in terms of fear, this oxymoron is a good way to think

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<sup>228</sup> Cohen, xxvii

about a 21<sup>st</sup> century steeped in fear narratives (and acute social panics). Fear is bigger than the events that constitute Cohen's moral panics. Yet, thinking of fear as a permanent moral panic fits my analysis. If we ignore the historical sociology argument Cohen makes, we could say that moral panics, as events, contribute and further larger fear narratives. After all, I can think of no better term for the turmoil circulating in Twin Falls throughout 2016, or even the media coverage surrounding the January 6<sup>th</sup> riots in Washington DC. I even introduced the Twin Falls story by referring to it as a "city-wide panic." Cohen's point, that "Full-fledged moral panics need an extreme or especially dramatic case to get going"<sup>229</sup> is a cog in the greater machinery that is fear. The Idaho story might well fulfill all the requirements of one of Cohen's moral panics, but it's both the result of a number of different fear logics and a contributor to those very same fear logics. Thinking about those events as "spasmodic" or something that will eventually "burn out" does a disservice to the power fear discourses have.

Hofstadter began his essay by writing "American politics has often been an arena for angry minds," and I would shorten it to better encapsulate my project to read, "America is an arena for fearful minds." This gets at the main difference between my analysis and Hofstadter and Cohen's work. Both, while insightful and useful in their own ways, view components of the American cultural landscape, whereas I'm looking at fear as being the definitive cultural landscape.

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<sup>229</sup> Cohen, xiii.

Fear with a Capital-F

In the 2019 American Studies Association Presidential Address Scott Kurashige makes a historical argument about capitalism that, like Donald Pease's point about a lack of state fantasies in a post-Cold War era, helps explain why fear is so prevalent today.<sup>230</sup> Kurashige argues that capitalism has finally broken down as the organizing structure in the world, and as a result humanity is teetering on the brink of something that could be either very bad or very good. For decades (if not centuries), people embraced the belief that a rising tide lifts all boats, and that corporations and people making money would inevitably mean everyone improves. Thus, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there wasn't much difference between conservative and liberal policy in the US: both sides shared the same foundational belief in capitalism. There would be some differences between democrat and republican government in principle, but in practice, they were quite similar. Now that it's apparent capitalism doesn't improve the lives of everyone (in fact, it seems to improve the lives of a very select few) we're seeing the extremes in the US political landscape form, as they try to reshape the US. I mention this in closing because it gets at the complicated nature of fear: Kurashige's argument makes a lot of sense, yet it's one replete with fear. The imagery of humanity "teetering" between a radical reconceptualization of society can be cause for optimism, but it's also potentially terrifying.

Fear has become so pervasive because there are massive shifts in how we think about core foundational principles. Kurashige picks up on a vacuum of sorts that's a result of belief in free-market capitalism finally faltering. In its wake, there are any number of different things to

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<sup>230</sup> Scott Kurashige (2019).

fear. The same holds true with core beliefs about American exceptionalism. Right-leaning discourse has framed the last two decades as a litany of values being under attack, but so too does left-leaning commentary reflect this as well (the response to the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot was one that said democracy itself was in danger of being destroyed).

21<sup>st</sup> century fear acts as a source of chronic stress, causing people to think less and respond to fear narratives in a more affect-heavy, less thoughtful manner. An established body of research in both psychology and neurology finds that cognitive abilities are impaired when people face acute stressors, and that chronic stress wreaks havoc on people's overall wellbeing. I examined three dominant fear discourses (digital media, Muslims, and guns), that combined, continually remind the American population their lives are in danger. January 6<sup>th</sup>, as a fear discourse itself, is no different. Here, we see rioters espousing the type of language found throughout other fear discourses. So too do we see coverage of the riots emphasize the danger the country is in. The ubiquity of all these fear narratives ensures a source of imagined danger is never far from the public mind.

A product of myriad fears, Fear with a capital-F decreases the chances of any single fear discourse disappearing. This is due to how chronic stress affects people: being continually reminded you're in danger makes it harder to unlearn fear associations. At this point, I've given up trying to convince people the election wasn't stolen from Trump or that Anthony Fauci isn't in cahoots with China, intent on trying to bring down the US. Similar to what Paula Ioanide chronicles in *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, no amount of verifiable facts seem to sway these beliefs. Yet I think understanding how fear operates can help make sense of this and address it. The events of January 6<sup>th</sup> are deeply concerning, but focusing on the events in isolation would be

like focusing on just Donald Trump and ignoring the forces that brought him to power. Doing either of those things is analyzing the symptoms and not the catalysts. Fear – and not just one fear – is what led to January 6<sup>th</sup>, and the fear discourses I’ve focused on have all played a role. Not only do discourses involving technology, Muslims, and guns limit the country’s ability to address a series of pressing issues specific to those topics, but those fear narratives play off each other, strengthening each other, ensuring they never fully disappear and augmenting the types of fear that have solidified Trump and what he represents as a political and cultural power.

In analyzing disparate cultural arenas, featuring a variety of texts, and showcasing how fear circulates in things ranging from presidential speeches to Comedy Central television programming, I’ve tried to emphasize just how prevalent fear is across a 21<sup>st</sup> century US landscape. Early in my career as a graduate student I wrote a seminar paper on why everyone hates Nickelback. It wasn’t a great paper by any stretch, but once I started telling people about this, I was inundated with texts, emails, and conversations about articles friends had seen that spoke to just how awful the Canadian rock band was. In short, once you started looking for it, Nickelback hate was everywhere. Musical taste doesn’t rise to the level of societal concern fear does, but just like Nickelback, once you start looking for fear, it becomes apparent it’s a defining component of life. Fear is everywhere, but you have to know how to look for it and how to deal with it.

As educators, we have a unique opportunity to address this. The humanities, writ large, is predicated on textual analysis which dovetails nicely with a fear theory built on examining how fear tropes circulate in a variety of arenas. In following the lead of psychology, we can teach texts that disrupt cultivated fear narratives, while explaining how existing works traffic in fear

associations that are detrimental to society. Doing so will contribute to dismantling individual fear discourses, limiting their specific power. It will also assist in lessening the overall stress stemming from Fear with a capital-F.

I worry – better yet I’m afraid – that unless something is done to address the biological nature of fear and its ingrained nature in American culture, events like January 6th will become the norm, not the exception. Addressing the fears at the root of the bogus claims put forth by Trump and his supporters will never be enough in a world dominated by other fear logics. That’s a scary proposition, but it’s the truth. Fear is ubiquitous in the strongest sense of the word, and treating it as such, and making it a point of analysis in research, can help illuminate why something like January 6<sup>th</sup> happened. More importantly though, addressing fear discourses whenever and wherever they appear assists in dismantling the most pernicious organizing structure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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