

Introduction: Narratives of Exception in the Warfare State

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Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed.

—Giorgio Agamben

The doctrine of exceptionalism has long organized the stories the United States tells about itself. Founded on the contradictory belief that the nation is unique yet universal, exceptionalism has been variously defined as providing the “psychosocial structures” by which citizens have disavowed the exceptions taken by the state (Pease 33–35); an understanding of the United States as the “apotheosis of the nation-form” and model for the world (Kaplan 15–16); an always already achieved ideal and discursive site of struggle (Singh 38–41; 136–38); a strategy by which US imperialism is distinguished and distanced from other imperial histories (Rowe, *Literary Culture* 6); and a conviction that the United States is called by a divine destiny, as a millenarian “redeemer nation” (Spanos, *American Calling* 12–16; *Globalization* xvii). Maintaining a belief in American exceptionalism, as these definitions underscore, relies on selectively remembering and construing the past, by negating the state-sanctioned violences that directly contradict the nation’s alleged exemplarity. It is no coincidence, then, that many of exceptionalism’s leading critics—Donald Pease, Amy Kaplan, John Carlos Rowe, William Spanos—were trained as literary scholars and write with a sensitivity to the ways in which narratives are constructed within and contribute to, even structure, a national political culture. Exceptionalism is a psychosocial logic, a way of differentiating and absolving the state, and a rationale for warmaking. But it

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is also a narrative framework. The contributors to this issue of *LIT* identify US exceptionalism as a storytelling enterprise and, in turn, investigate American literature's ability to reveal, contest, and rewrite the exceptionalist narratives of the nation's past and imagined future.

The War on Terror has reinigorated the critical scrutiny of American exceptionalism, and the following five essays all to varying degrees engage with issues of military violence and its legacies. Warfare is not only enabled by exceptionalist rhetoric ("a nation called to great responsibilities") but is also the foremost subject of exceptionalist disavowals ("a time set apart").¹ Giorgio Agamben argues that war is figuratively fundamental to declaring a state of exception in the United States. "Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war," he writes, "over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed" (21). In order to deactivate the legal order and effect an anomic sovereign authority, the president must invoke an image of the nation at war, as Franklin Roosevelt did during the Great Depression. However, when considering the post-World War II era, this "metaphor of war" is rarely merely figurative. In fact, if we define war more broadly as "organized state violence," as Rowe does ("US Novels" 813, 829–30), or according to combat medals awarded, as Mary Dudziak does (28–29), wartime begins to engulf much if not all of the nation's history.² The emergency becomes the rule. This condition is not easily preserved, though. The head of state must invoke wartime continuously while never admitting to the result: wars made and fought on a permanent basis, a warfare state. However contradictory the logic, anomic sovereignty is achieved by narratively constructing war as extraordinary and brief, as a series of regrettable but necessary one-off events. These many narratives of exception are framed by and ultimately come to reinforce a belief in US exceptionalism.

In this way the narrative structuring of warfare is fundamental to preserving the state of emergency, and so literature becomes a critical site for challenging these exceptionalist accounts of war. There is a long-standing tradition of American authors interrogating the nation's stories about itself and its conduct in the world, as indicated by the historical breadth of this issue. Before surveying the contributors' essays, I would like to briefly discuss the most recent focus of anti-exceptionalist literary criticism: the War on Terror and the exceptions taken by the state under the 2001 AUMF and USA PATRIOT Act, many of which are only now coming to light in the wake of the Edward Snowden leaks. Unfortunately, these analyses have often failed to ground twenty-first-century counterterrorism in historical perspective. In June 2011, one month after Osama bin Laden was killed in a bunker in the Hazara region of Pakistan, *Atlantic* writer Matt Gallagher asked why we have yet to see the great War on Terror novel, going so far as to coin the genre of

GWOT (Global War on Terror) fiction. “Almost a decade after the first bombs were dropped in Afghanistan,” he wrote, “even the most avid bookworm would be hard-pressed to identify a war novel that could be considered definitive of this new generation’s battles.” His desire for a “definitive” account of the ongoing war—a narrative arc with a beginning, an end, and a takeaway message—is built on a conventional understanding of what warfare is and should be. Gallagher is attached to the idea that wars carried out by the US military are temporary events that necessitate extraordinary means; they conform to a narrative framework (a “generation’s battles” can be told in a “definitive” way) and tell of remarkable times (the subject of a “great” novel). And yet there is real danger in addressing the War on Terror in these terms when considering the continuity between it and the many undeclared and uncompleted wars of the twentieth century.

Although their work is unlikely to meet Gallagher’s criteria for GWOT fiction, many of today’s novelists are indirectly engaging with the War on Terror by returning to midcentury Korea. While commentators continue to characterize the years since 2001 as an unparalleled era, these authors foreground the history of the Korean War to suggest otherwise. However subtly, they trace the rhetorical and material origins of the War on Terror back to 1945, when the US established a military government in Korea, and 1950, when the war began in earnest. It was Korea, they remind us, that provided the rationale for building a permanent standing military and a network of more than seven-hundred military installations around the world. Those mining this history include some of the most acclaimed American novelists writing today: Ha Jin in *War Trash* (2004), Philip Roth in *Indignation* (2008), Chang-rae Lee in *The Surrendered* (2010), and Toni Morrison in *Home* (2012). In what could be called the literature of the long War on Terror, these authors do not merely suggest a similarity between Korea and today’s antiterrorist wars but a continuity. Never formally declared, the Korean War was the first in a series of modern-day conflicts in which the newly formed Department of Defense would navigate around the very idea of war, seeking the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council rather than Congress and characterizing it as a safety measure—a “police action,” not a war. To this day the Korean War has not officially ended; an armistice, not a peace treaty, was signed in 1953, and there are still 40,000 American military personnel stationed in South Korea.³ These twenty-first-century Korean War novels highlight the enduring nature of American warfare by fracturing the timeframe of the conventional war novel favored by Gallagher. Lee backtracks to 1930s Manchuria, which some consider the true beginning of the Korean War,⁴ while Roth recounts the early 1950s from the perspective of an already dead American soldier.

But Ha Jin’s *War Trash* offers what may be the most direct counterhistory of the nation’s permanent state of emergency. *War Trash* is devised as the memoir of Chinese veteran Yu Yuan, a POW during Korea. In the novel’s twenty-first-century present, Yuan is visiting his son and grandchildren in

Atlanta where he sits down to record what he witnessed during the war. This frame narrative is revealing in how it casts the War on Terror as a legacy of Korea. When encountering the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at customs, Yuan is concerned by an old tattoo on his stomach, which reads, “FUCK . . . U . . . S . . .” This tattoo, we later learn, was branded on him during the war by Chinese Nationalists (those who would immigrate to Taiwan after the signing of the armistice) as “FUCK COMMUNISM” and later altered in China to an anti-American message. Observed by a TSA officer, Yuan recounts, “my heart fluttered like a trapped pigeon, afraid that the husky, cheerful-voiced officer might suspect something—that he might lead me into a room and order me to undress. The tattoo could have caused me to be refused entry to the States” (3). During the Korean War, Yuan was among the biological stakes (the “war trash”) of the conflict, branded by one side and then the other before returning to China as a suspected traitor. Under the watch of the Department of Homeland Security’s most visible agency, he senses this same bodily vulnerability. Yuan is once again worried about the political content of his body, as a thing to be concealed, regulated, monitored, and “refused entry.” In this Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel, Ha Jin identifies the global biopolitical logic of the War on Terror as arising from the Korean War-era ascendancy of the US military. Yuan recognizes that the “metaphor of war” is not merely invoked but actualized on a permanent basis by the United States. With this knowledge, he writes his memoir from Georgia in English so that his American children and grandchildren might one day understand his life in East Asia—and locate their country, as an enduring military presence, in the world.

Certainly re-narrating modern American wars as continuous rather than bounded—as a single unending state of emergency—is not achievable in one, or even a dozen, novels. However, when taken together, this growing body of literature articulates an emerging counterhistory of the American warfare state that refuses Gallagher’s call for “definitive” literary accounts of war. Novels are not manifestos, of course, and it would be ungenerous to read them as if they were. But they do tend to serve as revealing cultural barometers, identifying social shifts that are sometimes only beginning to crystallize. In the case of the twenty-first-century Korean War novel, the renewed cognizance of this little-known but formative war in US history may signal a transition in how Americans think about the exceptions taken by the state and the way they get told afterward. The contributors to this issue bring to light other residual, dominant, and emergent attitudes toward exceptionalism as they have changed and evolved throughout American history. They chart the many counterhistories advanced by literary authors, counterhistories in which the state’s disavowed violences are neither absolved nor rendered extraordinary. While the nation’s narratives of exception and technologies of war continue to evolve, as Snowden’s global surveillance disclosures demonstrate, so too does this literary antithesis.

The following essays trace narrative challenges to exceptionalist nationalism across three centuries of literary history. Considering the effect of 9/11 on how Americans' conceive of the future, Aaron DeRosa suggests that present-day US culture is marked by a strange "nostalgia for the future." Whereas the Cold War-era National Security State imagined a teleological future of ever-widening American influence around the world, today's Homeland Security State is instead organized around a backward-looking nostalgia for this former era and its imagined future. Analyzing Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012), DeRosa theorizes a genre that criticizes this exceptionalist nostalgia by combining mimetic narratives of the past with speculative representations of the near future, a "proleptic nostalgia fiction." Whereas Pease has argued that the traumatizing images of the nation's disavowed histories might offer sites from which to advance alternatives to the dominant state fantasy (38-39), DeRosa contends that speculative literary futures, which trouble the arrogance of military preemption, provide another course by which to counter exceptionalist violences.

Focusing on one of today's most celebrated writers in Louise Erdrich, Susan Strehle meanwhile considers a novel that does not move forward but back to the historical lynching of three Native Americans in Emmons County, North Dakota, at the turn of the twentieth century. Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* (2008), she argues, reimagines this history while revealing the national myths (Manifest Destiny, Virgin Land) that facilitated the erasure of the genocidal wars against Native Americans. Though disavowed, this history lingers in the subconscious, the "unknown dreams," of Erdrich's fictional North Dakota town. While Leslie Marmon Silko has criticized Erdrich for prioritizing aesthetics over politics, Strehle underscores the way in which she in fact employs narrative style to political ends, fracturing and reorienting the reductive history of a nation with a destiny.

Turning to the nineteenth century, John Havard analyzes Herman Melville's novella "Benito Cereno" (1855) to shed light on narrator Amasa Delano's racist view of Cereno. Whereas previous criticism has focused more on Delano's anti-black racism, Havard instead considers how Delano understands Cereno according to the "exceptionalist discourse of Hispanicism": the nineteenth-century attitude that Hispanophone people were not only violent tyrants but inefficient as well, unsuited for managerial roles in the capitalist world. Contra previous critics, however, he does not attribute Delano's views to the author but rather reveals how Melville provides a critical commentary on Hispanicism by ironizing Delano's perspective. In this way Melville challenges an "exceptionalist cosmopolitanism" that assumes Americans to be exclusively suited for benevolent global governance, and he advances an alternative "cosmopolitan awareness" that remains wary of identity categories and exceptionalist beliefs.

While Havard recounts the rise of early internationalist exceptionalism, Mary Vermillion considers the narrative arc of its long-feared decline. She argues that exceptionalists have repeatedly mobilized the tragic genre to glorify the nation's pursuit of freedom and aggrandize its fall. Analyzing Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991)—a modernized retelling of *King Lear* set in the wake of the Vietnam War—she suggests that Smiley allegorizes her main characters Larry and Ginny Cook, with Larry representing exceptionalists' celebration of the human will at the cost of others' freedoms and Ginny embodying Americans' belief in their own innocence, as dissociated from and victimized by the state. The novel dramatizes the social complexity of life in the United States, never altogether free nor altogether innocent but inevitably entangled in an often troubling national history.

Characterizing the War on Terror as the fulfillment of the exceptionalist narrative, William Spanos reveals the way in which five nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural works forecast this discursive end of exceptionalism. When George W. Bush addressed Congress on September 20, 2001, he invoked the genre of the American jeremiad wherein the United States is a chosen but ever-threatened nation. His shock-and-awe war in the Middle East would, moreover, render the long-disavowed violences of the state visible to Americans and the world. In this regard, Spanos argues, the War on Terror embodies the "liminality" of US exceptionalism in which it is revealed as spectacle or "self-de-structs," in Heideggerian terms. Analyzing American literature from Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1850) to Michael Herr's Vietnam memoir *Dispatches* (1977), he traces a literary prehistory to this post-9/11 liminality. These literary works in different ways suggest that at this discursive end of exceptionalism Americans might retrieve language from the spectacle and once again act as a polity.

Taken together, these five essays scrutinize exceptionalist national narratives and the literary counterhistories advanced from Melville to Erdrich. By noting the centrality of "metaphor" and "vocabulary" to warmaking, Agamben locates storytelling at the heart of sovereign power in the United States. But the contributors to this issue emphasize that how these stories get told—how we situate ourselves in relation to the world—has very real effects on the conduct of a nation mired in permanent war and its own narratives of exception.

NOTES

I would like to thank the anonymous readers who contributed their time and wide-ranging knowledge to this issue. I would also like to thank the editors, Gina Barreca and Margaret Mitchell, for allowing me to collect and edit this set of essays, and Donald Pease, to whom this issue is indebted in many ways. Lastly, for sharing their insightful and original work, I am very grateful to the contributors: Aaron DeRosa, Susan Strehle, John Havard, Mary Vermillion, and William Spanos. Thank you.

1. These lines are taken from George W. Bush's 2004 State of the Union address, in which he characterized the United States as a "nation with a mission" with "no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire." Simultaneously, however, he represents this call to war as extraordinary: "we sense that we live in a time set apart. . . . And even some of the youngest understand that we are living in historic times."

2. By using the term "organized state violence," Rowe is able to disassociate war from the state's claim to defining what does and does not constitute warfare. This category would include slavery, the CPUSA's war on capitalism, and the many overlooked "small wars" (821–22, 829). Dudziak, on the other hand, uses the state's definition of war against itself, recounting a military history of permanent war through the eligibility criteria for combat medals and membership in veterans' organizations.

3. In Bruce Cumings account, it was the Korean War—aggravated by the "loss" of China in 1949—that provided the rationale for building a permanent standing military and a global network of more than seven hundred military installations throughout Europe and Asia. There are still tens of thousands of American soldiers stationed at South Korean bases today (*Dominion* 395).

4. When Japan invaded northeast China in 1931 and installed the puppet state of Manchukuo, Koreans represented the vast majority of resisters. Among them was the man who would later take the name Kim Il Sung. There was, however, a small number of Koreans who joined the Manchukuo Imperial Army, an arm of the Imperial Japanese Army. Among them was future President of South Korea Park Chung Hee (Shin'ichi 259). For North Koreans, this anticolonial war produced Korean heroes (Kim Il Sung) and traitors (Park Chung Hee), a history that would directly inform the Korean War of the early 1950s. "They essentially," Cumings writes, "saw the war in 1950 as a way to settle the hash of the top command of the South Korean army, nearly all of whom had served the Japanese" (*Korean War* 44–45).

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