

Through a reading of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this essay outlines a theory of critical global fiction: literary works that contest the forces inhibiting global understanding and advance international coalitions through this struggle itself.

Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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The question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a "person"; it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible.

—*Judith Butler*, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

On 13 February 2013, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta introduced the Distinguished Warfare Medal.

The medal would honour those military technicians carrying out and defending against cyberattacks and directing unmanned aerial vehicles, or "drones." Panetta, a former CIA director, emphasized that he had seen these "modern tools" change the "way wars are fought" throughout his tenures at Langley and the Pentagon. "This award," he added, "recognizes the reality of the kind of technological warfare that we are engaged in in the twenty-first century." The Distinguished Warfare Medal would rank higher than the Bronze Star but lower than the Silver Star, and it faced almost immediate criticism. Veterans' organizations argued that the award should not outrank combat medals. Critics of drone strikes characterized the medal as a way to institutionalize permanent war, denouncing it as a "Nintendo medal" or "drone medal."

Two months later, Chuck Hagel, Panetta's successor, cancelled the medal. In a brief memo, Hagel announced that he would be replacing it with a "distinguishing device" in order to reserve military medals for "those Service members who incur the physical risk and hardship of combat, [. . .] are wounded in combat, or as a result of combat give their last full measure for our Nation." American military medals are, as Hagel suggests, less about what is achieved than what is risked along the way. Some soldiers are faced with a greater likelihood of injury or death than others. This is the logic that informs the hierarchy of military medals. And yet politicians and policy-makers are disinclined to recognize non-American life in the same way; they refuse to see Afghan and Pakistani lives—the chief targets of these drone strikes—according to the conditions that sustain or endanger those lives.

With the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) and PATRIOT Act still in effect and no end in sight to the decade-old War on Terror, it is critical that we understand the way in which war circumscribes our ability to recognize the lives of others. Literature is one channel through which we might learn to think otherwise. In the last twenty years, the so-called "transnational turn" in literary studies has led many critics to analyze national traditions in relation to global currents of culture and finance. And more recently, scholars are beginning to theorize a global literature that goes beyond the discourses of transnationalism and canonical world literature. These scholars consider how literary works endeavour to transcend national boundaries and imagine global community. Literature can, they argue, lend narrative structure to an emerging global imaginary. But this body of work tends to focus more on a future coming-together than the ongoing warfare, inhumane detainment, and belligerent nationalism that block this imagined future. Through a reading of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I thus aim to outline what could be called "critical global fiction": literary works that contest the forces inhibiting global understanding and build international coalitions *through this struggle itself*. This literature is founded on the idea that life is not bounded and isolated but always conditioned by one's material and social surroundings. The issue then becomes, as Judith Butler notes, "whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible" and why (*Frames* 20). In an effort to rethink global fiction, I first recount the established body of work on "global" or "cosmopolitan" literature. I then build on Butler's theory of "precarious life" to theorize a global fiction built on a criticism of warmaking and arbitrary violence. Third, I analyze Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to clarify the way it challenges the logic of the War on Terror in the interest not of anti-American hostility but of international solidarity.

The idea of global literature has provoked no small amount of uncertainty and anxiety among critics. Is this merely American or Western literature disguised as global culture? Is the category too unfocused to be a meaningful or constructive area of study? Does global literature efface cultural, ethnic, racial, and regional differences? Is it the domain of privileged jetsetters alone? These issues animate many of the studies theorizing the genre. Shameem Black, for one, articulates what she calls “border-crossing fiction,” a genre grounded in an ethics of humility. These contemporary authors do not assume they can altogether understand someone else’s life and instead foreground the struggle to mediate social difference (3-4). The ethics that emerge are not about understanding but the always-unfinished search for it. Black’s border-crossing fiction thus negotiates difference without committing the “representational violence” or “ventriloquism” of which these works might otherwise be accused. Rebecca Walkowitz in a similar way celebrates “cosmopolitan modernist” literature that is less about leading a cosmopolitan lifestyle than *thinking as* a cosmopolitan. These writers challenge the boundary distinguishing local from global by imagining the world, even when they cannot see it. The features of modernist style—“wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language”—are critical, she argues, to thinking globally in the twentieth century and today (6-7).

The sense of global belonging or community is also central to many of these hypotheses. Rita Barnard, for example, mobilizes Benedict Anderson’s theory of the novel’s “national imagination” to posit a “fiction of the global.” Whereas the national novel is built on the idea of a shared past, the global novel is built on the idea of a shared future and the responsibility that it necessitates (214). This is best embodied, she suggests, in the “hyperlink” narrative structure of many contemporary films and literary works dramatizing global inter-reliance. Jessica Berman also sees global literature as a community-forming endeavour. This literature stages “radically new forms of cosmopolitan communities” by imagining a sense of belonging that goes beyond the immediately recognizable and familiar (27). Like Walkowitz, she focuses on modernist fiction, underscoring literature’s capacity for making and remaking community. Literary works do more than reflect global change, she contends; they also facilitate it. These global literary theories, in short, emphasize the ways in which literature might introduce and fortify a global imaginary.

This world-making literature is no doubt critical to fostering global understanding. But there is also a need for fiction that brings to light those forces that negate the border-crossing ethics of Black’s study or the global responsibility of Barnard’s. This fiction, what I am calling critical global fiction, does not discount the need to create international alliances; it rather sees the struggle against militarism and brutality itself

as a site for a global coming-together. In advancing this claim, I am recruiting three ideas from Butler's theory of precarious life. First, war influences the norms by which we recognize life ("recognizability"). Second, to counteract this system of norms we must understand the human as "precarious," as faced with life's end from the start, and differentially so. Third, acknowledging our shared precariousness might form the basis of an international coalition committed to contesting those forces that differentially subject some to life's precariousness ("precarity"). I am not, however, suggesting that Butler's theory is the master key for all global literature or even Hamid's novel. These ideas are already beginning to circulate in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and other literary works. They are, à la Raymond Williams, structures of feeling. What philosophy can offer here is a clear and thorough account of the ideas literature is already evoking and staging.

Who we are able to recognize as a living being is always conditioned by social norms, and these norms are all the more limited during times of war. This is what Butler refers to as "recognizability," the set of social frames demarcating what we can and cannot recognize as human life (*Frames* 5). These frames are nowhere more noticeable than in acts of public grieving. Who we choose to grieve in obituaries and memorials says a lot about where we as a society set these boundaries. When a death is either omitted or celebrated as a victory, it is cast as ungrievable and hence not a life to begin with; it is situated outside our frame of life. Butler therefore suggests that we must rethink the category of the human itself. In contrast to the discourse of individualism, which focuses on biological boundedness and autonomy, she advances a "social ontology" of the human that emphasizes the conditions sustaining that life. Life is from the start precarious; it is defined by the fact that it is always vulnerable to and must end in death. Once we understand life according not to biological boundedness but mutual precariousness, we can begin to see the way in which some lives are made more precarious than others. Butler signals this distinction with the term "precarity": whereas all lives are precarious—we are all always faced with the risk of life's end—precarity "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (25). This is something Secretary Hagel acknowledges when he reserves military medals for "those Service members who incur the physical risk and hardship of combat." But it must also be acknowledged beyond the borders of one's own nation. In order to do so, however, we need to set aside the individualist and rights-based discourses that emerged from and are bound to the modern nation-form. It should be emphasized that Butler's claim is not only that some lives are more endan-

gered than others; she, moreover, insists that this basic insight might form the foundation of a different order of ontological knowledge altogether. Instead of taking for granted that there are “individuals” who then encounter violence in different ways and in different amounts, we might reverse this thinking and thereby recognize that this violence in fact conditions and creates the category of the individual—who is included and who is not—from the very beginning.

The struggle against those forces that create precarity might, Butler argues, form the basis for a different order of international coalition. One challenge of cultivating a sense of global community is the way rigid understandings of difference tend to set one identity against another. Butler, for example, recounts how President George W. Bush called on progressive sexual politics after 9/11 to characterize Islam as “backward” and thereby rationalize US intervention in Western and South Asia (*Frames* 104).¹ One way to counteract this fracturing of the Left is to build coalitions around a struggle against the sources of precarity. This does not mean we should do away with the fight for, say, the rights of African Americans; it would rather be supplementary and mutually recognizing. “Mobilizing alliances,” Butler writes, “do not necessarily form between established and recognizable subjects, and neither do they depend on the brokering of identitarian claims. Instead, they may well be instigated by criticisms of arbitrary violence” (162). This alliance would endeavour to foster a global imaginary through a collective challenge to the forces that continually deny it. Put differently, Butler’s theory of precarious life is at once an alternative ontology to individualism and an alternative politics to one grounded exclusively in identity. The latter thereby moves beyond calls to merely widen the norms of recognizability and, crucially, no longer sees the nation-state as the ultimate horizon for and sole arbiter of justice. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is one work in which we can see this critical global thinking beginning to emerge.

The *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid’s second novel, is the story of one man’s awakening to the frames of recognizability. The Pakistani protagonist, Changez, is working for the elite New York valuation firm Underwood Samson after graduating from Princeton in 2001. Over the course of eight months that include the September 11 attacks, he becomes more and more troubled with US policy in South Asia and how he and other Muslims are being treated in New York. No longer able to work for the “officers of the empire,” he returns to Pakistan to become a university lecturer. This story is recounted by an older Changez to an unspeaking American at a café in Lahore. It is a meeting marked by distrust. The text insinuates that the American could be a CIA agent and that Changez could be a terrorist or terrorist sympathizer.

The fact that these misgivings are never confirmed underscores the way in which recognizability, the “general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition” (*Frames* 5), regulates who we recognize and in what way. Hamid’s novel thereby stages Changez’s awakening to these frames but also lays bare the workings of recognizability for the reader. What frames are conditioning *our* understanding of Changez and the American? Who is grievable as living and why?

Although most of the story occurs after September 11, 2001, it is worth emphasizing that Changez’s cognizance of life’s nationalist framings begins to emerge before this date.² On his first international assignment in Manila, he and his colleagues are stuck in traffic in a limousine. Changez is feeling “enormously powerful” as he reflects on how his team is “shaping the future” when he locks eyes with a Filipino jeepney driver: “There was an undisguised hostility in his expression; I had no idea why. We had not met before—of that I was virtually certain—and in a few minutes we would probably never see one another again. But his dislike was so obvious, so *intimate*, that it got under my skin. [. . .] I remained preoccupied with this matter far longer than I should have, pursuing several possibilities that all assumed—as their unconscious starting point—that he and I shared a sort of Third World solidarity” (67). The meaning of the Filipino man’s hostile stare does not at first register for Changez. He struggles to understand why this stranger might detest him. This unformed consciousness embodies what Butler calls “apprehension,” that haunted feeling that is not exactly recognition but not altogether ignorable either. The act of apprehending is, as Butler describes it, “bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge” (*Frames* 5). Changez arrives in Manila as an American businessman and at first takes on the recognizability of this social location. But under the gaze of the jeepney driver, he begins to perceive the norms that determine what he can and cannot see from this station. When he thinks through this man’s look, working to transform a feeling into knowledge, his “unconscious starting point” is that they must share a “sort of Third World solidarity.” Changez apprehends this man’s life as a precarious life—according to the social conditions that do or do not sustain him as a citizen of the Third World—and thereby forms the basis of a recognition that breaks the frames of recognizability set for him by Underwood Samson.

It is striking, then, that Changez identifies the man’s vehicle as a jeepney without elaborating on the historical significance of this detail. Jeepneys, a portmanteau combining “jeep” with “jitney,” are public utility vehicles built from American jeeps that were left in the Philippines after World War II. They thereby evoke the long history of imperial rule in the Philippines that culminated in the atrocities committed there during WWII, in which the islands were controlled at different times by the US military

and the Imperial Japanese Army. Hence, in characterizing the Filipino man as a “driver of a Jeepney,” he apprehends his life according to the material, historical, and social factors that differentially endanger it. The man’s stare is “so *intimate*” for Changez because it comes with a set of conditions that signal his precariousness, even his precarity. His is a “politically induced condition.” This is not to say that the Filipino man lacks agency and is merely an outcome of others’ actions; he is rather entangled with others—vulnerable to them as they are to him—as we all are (Butler, *Precarious* 27-28). When he concludes that he and the man must share a “Third World sensibility,” Changez is advancing a solidarity that goes beyond nationalism. To relate to someone on these grounds is to recognize a shared precariousness or precarity, as life that is differentially endangered by state violence. This is a solidarity that is not only non-national but in fact grounded in the struggle against nationalist forms of brutality. The men do not know one another and “would probably never see one another again” and yet they are bound by a “sort of” global imaginary that Changez is only beginning to perceive.

Changez’s apprehension of the Jeepney driver comes in stark contrast to the total indifference of his Underwood Samson colleagues. Turning his gaze from the Manila street to another man in the limo, Changez begins to see this colleague differently: “I looked at him—at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work—and thought, you are so *foreign*. [. . .] I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside” (67). This is a swift about-face for Changez. Only seconds earlier he had been basking in the power of deciding the fate of Filipino workers and, like this man, was absorbed by his own financial analyses. After considering the jeepney driver’s hostile stare, however, he begins to see this colleague as “*foreign*,” a word that recalls the imperial legacy of the Philippines in the same way that the reconstituted military jeep does. This also establishes a dialectic conflict that Hamid maintains throughout *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Changez’s colleague is a professional valuator—he can identify and calculate all of the risks and rewards involved in running a business—and yet he is entirely unable to do the same for a life that is unrecognizable according to American norms. Finance sees all of the factors that sustain or endanger a business, whereas a theory of precarious life sees all of the factors that sustain or endanger a life. In his awakening to the precarity of others, Changez begins to realize that the former’s aims do not align with and even directly contradict those of the latter. Finance in this way becomes “play-acting” rather than an earnest engagement with the world.

The dialectic of finance and precarious life becomes all the more noticeable when Changez visits his family in Pakistan at the end of 2001. The United States has begun

bombing along the Afghan border, and Pakistan is facing the threat of war with India. When he returns to his parents' house, their furnishings become a way for him to mediate his feelings toward Pakistan. Changez is disheartened by the shabbiness of the house's interior. "But," he adds, "as I reacclimatized and my surroundings once again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American." He realizes that he must set aside the "Americanness" of his gaze because in Lahore a "different way of *observing* is required" (124). Changez's "entitled and unsympathetic American" eyes are in fact those of Underwood Samson; he is looking for the dollar value of his parents' house. Considering his childhood home as an American valuator might, he cannot see it as one of many conditions sustaining his parents' lives, only a building lacking in market value. He is seeing Lahore, he realizes, as his colleague in Manila might: as a "foreigner" lost in the minutiae of his work.

To characterize Lahore as necessitating a "different way of *observing*" is to suggest that the American frames of life, which after 9/11 are affected by frames of war, obstruct the recognition of Pakistanis as precarious lives and thus lives at all. The fact that Changez considers the furnishings of the house *before* turning his focus to his family reemphasizes this normalized way of seeing. The precariousness or precarity of others is obscured during times of war, as Butler notes, through a "fantasy of mastery": when one apprehends the precarious life of the other—and thus unconsciously one's own—this can provoke a desire to "master" this precariousness through the "instruments of war" (*Precarious* 29). But sustaining this fantasy would also entail endless carnage. Changez's valuation of his parents' house works in a similar way. Too ashamed to recognize the precarity signaled by his family's social conditions, he instead engages in a fantasy of mastery in which he controls these conditions through a financial calculus.

Changez's fantasy is short-lived, however. Shedding his American gaze, he is reminded of the rich history of the house, the "Mughal miniatures," "ancient carpets," and "excellent library" that together form an "unmistakable personality" (125). The furnishings of his childhood home in this way serve as an allegory for Changez's larger awakening to life's precariousness. His analysis of the house is at first limited to surface details—the age of the furniture and the damaged paintwork—that are knowable within the recognizability of American norms. When he begins to scrutinize the larger *contexts* of the house, though, he is reminded of the history these "shabby" furnishings chronicle. He can see the house as something that has and does sustain life, rather than a valueless family holding. This scene embodies the basic mechanism of critical global

fiction. Changez becomes conscious of the frames restricting recognizability and thereby denaturalizes and counteracts them. Once he sees the house not as an isolated entity but as conditioned by his family's history, it becomes more difficult to disdain or ignore it; it becomes intimate and recognizable as a site of precarious life.

Changez cannot maintain a fantasy of mastery when it comes to Lahore either. With India and Pakistan both mobilizing hundreds of thousands of soldiers along their shared border, he is afraid for himself and for his family. "I felt powerless," he tells the American. "I was angry at our weakness, at our vulnerability to intimidation of this sort from our—admittedly much larger—neighbor to the east" (128). Whereas his first reaction to the circumstances in Pakistan is to deny them through a foreigner's norms of recognizability, once he admits to his own "vulnerability" he is also able to see the precarity of his family's conditions. Changez recognizes that under the threat of the "much larger" Indian military his family is *differentially* at risk of dying. This "politically induced condition" is made worse by the War in Afghanistan and the United States' neutrality on the military standoff in South Asia—a policy that, Changez remarks, implicitly favours the larger Indian Army. Instead of working to master and mask his vulnerability, he begins to see that one might, in Butler's words, "make grief itself into a resource for politics" (*Precarious* 30). Changez takes account of his own precariousness and thereby becomes more cognizant of others' bodily risk and the sources of this risk.

Whereas *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been criticized by some as anti-American,³ we might instead see it as anti-precarity. In the weeks after September 11, 2001, the Bush administration chose a fantasy of mastery rather than mobilizing grief as a "resource for politics." But this was and is not the only choice. The trouble with warmaking is that it creates precarity "elsewhere" in order to mask precariousness "here."⁴ The latter could instead become a resource for recognizing and counteracting the former. Tarrying in our own grief might broaden our understanding of the conditions that sustain or endanger life beyond the boundaries of American recognizability. Secretary Hagel might then recognize lives other than American combat soldiers according to the "physical risk and hardship" they incur. This would, however, necessitate a radical break from the nation-bound discourse of individualism and state-conferred sovereign rights, a discourse built around the restrictive norm of the "individual." The argument that Hamid's fiction is anti-American is in some ways a reaction to this alternative and post-nationalist "social ontology." Changez does not turn to Pakistani nationalism per se and thereby resituate the nation-state as the mediator of all freedom struggles; instead, he considers the lives of others contextually first, as sustained or endangered by social and political conditions. With this as

the framework for ontological knowledge, one begins to see the nation-state itself—and the conferral or denial of individual status it organizes—as a source of precarity. When it comes to the War on Terror, Butler’s theory of precarious life would no doubt be mobilized against the United States’ conduct in Western and South Asia. But *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also zeroes in on other colonial histories in South America, the Pacific, and India and Pakistan. Moving toward an ontology and politics of precarious life is, then, a challenge to all organized violence and not only or always that carried out by the United States.

When Changez returns to New York from Lahore, he symbolizes this change of consciousness by maintaining a two-week-old beard. “It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part,” he recalls, “a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind” (130). Changez’s beard provokes unease among his colleagues at Underwood Samson, who see it not as a “form of protest” but as an incendiary gesture. Based on his time in Lahore, though, Changez’s beard is not about solidarity with terrorists but with those living in a state of precarity in Western and South Asia. The idea that he is leaving “reality” in Pakistan once again contrasts the “play-acting” of finance with the world of precarious life. Maintaining a beard is Changez’s way of reminding himself of and thereby offsetting the American norms that restrict his capacity to recognize the lives of others. The beard is a sign of global solidarity with Muslims in Asia and the United States, the latter being monitored and detained under the newly ratified PATRIOT Act. That the beard is for Changez a symbol of identity, a reminder, and a form of protest emphasizes how an international coalition might emerge from the struggle against state violence. Changez does not characterize himself as a devout Muslim and yet he sees this identity as a critical site of resistance in the months after 9/11. The theory of coalition-building that Butler advances does not “depend on the brokering of identitarian claims” (*Frames* 162); it rather mobilizes against the forces that create precarity. In the years after the attacks on New York and Washington, many Muslims became differentially endangered. Recognizing and contesting this precarity thus becomes an opportunity to build an international coalition of the Left. To do so, however, one must first break the frames of war that entice us with a fantasy of mastery.

The *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as a work of critical global fiction, offers a counter-statement to one of the most established ways of understanding the post-9/11 era: Giorgio Agamben’s account of “bare life.” The original political relation is, according to Agamben, the “ban” in which a life is not set outside the legal order but rather “abandoned” at a threshold that is at once inside and outside this order (*Homo* 28-29).

The human is thus rendered as bare life, banned from the political realm and yet constituting the biological locus of politics (6). Although Agamben does not see the politicizing of biological life as bound to modernity—as Foucault did—he does characterize Bush’s conduct after 9/11 as the moment at which the “emergency became the rule,” when we were all hailed as bare life (*State* 22). And yet Agamben sees the universalizing of bare life as also offering a site around which a radical struggle against this condition might coalesce (*Homo* 188). Hamid’s novel differs from Agamben’s theory of bare life in two critical ways. Traveling from New York to Manila and then to Lahore, Changez recognizes that not all lives are rendered as bare life in the same way; many are differentially endangered by the economic and social conditions arising from war, globalization, and the legacy of colonialism. While acknowledging that precariousness is a basic condition of life, it is also necessary that we recognize where and when a state of precarity emerges. This might offer an alternative basis for global understanding that is not built around a totalizing “ban” but a struggle against the arbitrary violence that endangers some differentially. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* thus distinguishes precarity from the generalized condition of precariousness, and it makes clear that this is not an outcome of the War on Terror alone but an enduring feature of the globalizing world. Changez’s “apprehension” of this “politically induced condition” does not begin on September 11, 2001 but in a pre-9/11 Manila traffic jam. The ongoing War on Terror has no doubt worsened this condition for many Western and South Asians, but it may not be the universalizing moment Agamben makes it out to be.

It is not, after all, Pakistan but a stay in Valparaiso, Chile, that has the greatest effect on Changez’s awakening to the American norms of recognizability. Changez is assigned to valuate an unprofitable publishing company in Chile, where he comes into contact with Juan-Bautista, the company’s charismatic CEO. Juan-Bautista disdains the work of Changez and his Underwood Samson colleagues. But he takes a liking to Changez and encourages him to familiarize himself with the city of Valparaiso. When Changez begins to see the same signs of precarity in Valparaiso—a once-bustling but outmoded port city—as he had in Manila and Lahore, he is unable to carry out his valuation and resigns from Underwood Samson. Seeing another valuator hard at work on their assignment, Changez realizes, “I could not respect how he functioned so completely immersed in the structures of his professional micro-universe. Yes, I too had previously derived comfort from my firm’s exhortations to focus intensely on work, but I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one’s emotional present. In other words, my blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision” (145).

Changez has, in Chile, broken from the American frames of life that had earlier constrained his “arc of vision.” Observing his Underwood Samson colleague, he can identify the “structures” and “micro-universe” in which the man is acting. These structures are no longer natural for Changez but coerced ways of seeing the world. Finance offers a fantasy of mastery for this man in which every variable can be accounted for and controlled. This is a source of “comfort” but one that also, Changez notes, masks a broader understanding of human life. Many critics point to the allegorical subtext of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in which Underwood Samson (“US”) embodies the United States and Changez symbolizes rising Asia (“changes”).⁵ The United States is, then, “striving to realize a financial future”—outsourcing manufacturing to Asia and transitioning to an information-based economy—while Asia perceives the ominous endgame to this futurism. But we might also see this allegory according to the dialectic of finance and precarious life. Changez’s Underwood Samson colleague cannot see beyond the recognizability of American frames, whereas Changez signals an emerging global imaginary, one that resists the former’s fantasy of mastery. The allegory, then, does not only speak to a changing world economy but also a different order of global understanding, one that sees life according to a social ontology of differentiated precariousness.

This theory of precarious life is reinforced by the many locations in which the novel is set. Two of the most crucial scenes occur not in the United States or Pakistan but in the Philippines and Chile. This is something Leerom Medovoi has called the “third spaces” of a “properly cognitive world map” (647). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not a transnational or comparative work of fiction but one that casts the United States and Pakistan in a global network of cultural and economic interconnectedness. When Changez’s “blindness” comes off and he is “dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of [his] arc of vision,” this occurs in Valparaiso, Chile, not at the sight of his own family’s struggles in Lahore. He is more cognizant of the United States’ actions in Western and South Asia than he was months earlier. But he is also beginning to recognize the broader reality of life as socially and politically conditioned, and differentially so. When he visits Valparaiso and, on Juan-Bautista’s recommendation, begins to learn about the city and how his firm’s actions could affect Chilean workers, he can no longer derive “comfort” from the frames of American recognizability. Under these frames, Butler writes, “certain kinds of bodies will appear more precariously than others, depending on which versions of the body, or of morphology in general, support or underwrite the idea of the human life that is worth protecting, sheltering, living, and mourning” (*Frames* 53). These are the frames of recognizability that serve to rationalize war. They restrict who we can and cannot

recognize as grievable life, and when a life cannot be grieved it is not constituted as life at all and so becomes unmurderable. One can then kill without killing. Understanding life as always precarious—as sustained or endangered by social conditions—can, as Changez comes to see in Chile, break these frames that create and mask precarity.

The “third spaces” of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are also significant in what they suggest about global coalition-building. Although Changez eventually returns to Pakistan and organizes protests against US policy in Western and South Asia, the novel does not necessarily endorse Pakistani nationalism as a solution to the War on Terror. When analyzed in relation to Changez’s broadening “arc of vision” in Manila and Valparaiso, these protests might be better understood as part of a wider struggle against those arbitrary acts of violence that differentially endanger lives around the world. To recognize only those lives who are most familiar, whether American or Pakistani, is to restrict the category of grievable life to the “structures” and “micro-universe” of national frames. This is not a way out of violence; it is rather consenting to one system of violence over another (*Frames* 26). When Changez turns his focus from his firm’s “financial future” to the “critical personal and political issues that affect one’s emotional present,” he is recognizing the social contexts that fall outside the norms of recognizability. Taking account of life in this way—as socially entangled and vulnerable from the start—denaturalizes the frames that fracture and fragment. This is at once a method of criticism and grounds for advancing an international coalition against state violence. We can never of course comprehend another life entirely. But we can, as Butler notes, “interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense” (*Precarious* 151). We can still broaden our arcs of vision beyond the micro-universes of national frames of war and life.

This is the criticism of the United States that Changez shares with the unspeaking American. “As a society,” he tells him, “you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions” (168). He adds that the United States thus needed to be “stopped” for the good of humanity and itself. This older Changez suggests that the United States missed an opportunity to turn grief into a “resource for politics.” The “shared pain” of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 was a precarious moment for the nation, a moment in which this precariousness could have been recognized as a basic condition of life everywhere. Instead, however, Bush declared an end to grief nine days later in his address to Congress and the nation.⁶ It was, as Changez tells his interlocutor, the idea

of American “difference” that became a rationale for warmaking, for bringing “justice to our enemies.” Whereas tarrying in one’s precariousness might foster a greater understanding of others’ lives, emphasizing one’s difference tends to further restrict the norms of recognizability. Taken in this way, the mystery as to whether or not Changez “stopped” the United States through terrorist activity is not that mysterious after all. Changez is, as a lecturer and organizer, mobilizing his students against the sources of precarity and not the United States specifically. It is in this way that his work could also be, as he says, in the interest of humanity, Americans included. But this is only achievable through cognizance of one’s “shared pain” and not the “instruments of war” and the fantasy they arouse. Moving among Americans, Filipinos, Pakistanis, and Chileans, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* advances a different order of international solidarity that struggles against and so together.

On 23 May 2013, President Barack Obama vowed to end the War on Terror that had begun more than a decade earlier. In an hour-long address at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, he announced his intention to curtail the use of drones, close the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, and “refine” and “ultimately repeal” the AUMF that had been in effect since 14 September 2001. This policy shift would be undertaken, Obama stated, in order to “determine how we can continue to fight terrorism without keeping America on a perpetual wartime footing. [. . .] Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. But this war, like all wars, must end.” In the contradictory way that warfare is narrativized in the twenty-first century, the War on Terror thus “must continue” and yet it also “must end”; the military must “fight” and “dismantle” but not carry out a war. The answer to whether or not the United States is in fact on a “perpetual wartime footing” comes down to the way in which we choose to define “war” today. Do all wars end? What constitutes a war’s ending in an age of drones and cyberwarfare?

The incongruity of a war that ends as it continues returns us to Butler’s theory of wartime recognizability. When others are rendered as threats to humanity but not humans themselves, they become unreal; they must be killed and yet, as nonlife, cannot die and remain animated. The unreal other thereby becomes “interminably spectral,” rationalizing a state of permanent war: “The infinite paranoia that imagines the war against terrorism as a war without end will be one that justifies itself endlessly in relation to the spectral infinity of its enemy” (*Precarious* 34). The war that ends and yet must continue is grounded in the life who is and yet is not a life, who can be apprehended but not recognized, who must be “dismantled” but cannot be murdered. Today’s War on Terror cannot end as long as our understanding of the human

remains bound to national frames of who can and cannot be recognized as such. Closing the Guantánamo Bay facility and revoking the AUMF would represent crucial changes in US counterterrorism policy. But we must also transform how we see the lives of others, not as “interminably spectral” but as socially conditioned and vulnerable to us as we are to them. I have argued here that literature is one site where precarious life is being evoked and staged, where the sources of precarity are being contested, and where global coalitions are being reimagined through this struggle. In Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez’s “arc of vision” broadens to include the precarious lives of a Filipino jeepney driver, a Chilean bookseller, Pakistani university students, and an American in Lahore. This critical global fiction challenges the idea of the “other” and the alien “elsewhere” so that we might imagine otherwise.

NOTES

1/ This fracturing of the Left is one hazard of the transnational turn in literary studies. When the focus of global literature becomes categories of “difference,” as Paul Jay notes, this can lead to the same rigidity of identity that informs many national traditions (*Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010. 199. Print). We might instead, as I am suggesting, build global coalitions out of the struggle against the violence of the latter.

2/ Anna Hartnell argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenges American multiculturalism both before and after September 11, 2001 (“Moving through America: Race, Place, and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.3-4 [2010]: 339. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 1 June 2013). Leerom Medovoi, on the other hand, reads Hamid’s novel according to sociologist Giovanni Arrighi’s “world-system analysis” to argue that the Vietnam War was the “signal crisis” in the decline of American global hegemony. The 9/11 attacks then become the ensuing “terminal crisis” in this decline (652).

3/ The conservative journalist Ann Marlowe condemns *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as “anti-American agitprop clumsily masquerading as a work of art” (“Buying Anti-American.” *National Review*, 14 May 2007. Web. 1 June 2013). Her account of the novel, however, overlooks the broader reach of Hamid’s work; it is not anti-American per se but rather criticizes a whole series of systemic state violences linked to colonialism, imperialism, and warmaking—whether present or past, American or otherwise. And whereas Marlowe’s review embodies a far-right perspective on the novel, even moderate and left-leaning reviewers struggle to find the language to describe Changez’s actions outside of anti-Americanism, focusing exclusively on his “anti-American protests” and the way he is “insulted by American foreign policy” and becomes a “reluctant anti-American” (see Karen Olsson’s “I Pledge Allegiance” in the *New York Times* [22 Apr. 2007. Web. 1 June 2013]; Paula Bock’s “An American Dream Turns to Dust in the Rubble of the Twin Towers” in the *Seattle Times* [10 Apr. 2007. Web. 1 June 2013]; and Marina Budhos’s “Runes of Ruins” in the *Brooklyn Rail* [2 May 2007. Web. 1 June 2013]). These reviews tend to overlook the larger global and historical claims made throughout Hamid’s novel.

4/ In their readings of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Margaret Scanlan and Peter Morey both contend that the novel troubles the binaries—the “with us or against us” mentality—of the War on Terror. Morey calls this the “deterritorialization of American literature” (“‘The rules of the game have changed’: Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.2 [2011]: 138. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 1 June 2013), whereas Scanlan refers to it as fiction that “insists on finding a living, breathing space” (“Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.3-4 [2010]: 277. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 1 June 2013).

5/ Although this essay does not analyze the allegorical undercurrent of Hamid's novel in detail, other critics interrogate the significance of Changez's love interest Erica as "America"; Erica's deceased boyfriend Chris as "Christianity" or the "Old World"; Underwood Samson as the "US" state; and Changez himself as "changes" (see Medovoi 654-66; Hartnell 342-43; Morey 140; and Scanlan 274-75).

6/ On 20 September 2001, Bush announced, "Our grief has turned to anger and our anger to resolution." He then added, "Even grief recedes with time and grace."

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