Worlds of Fear: Discourses of Collective Threat

by

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A suspicious character, a cloud of dust, less than this even: a sound, a light, a shadow is enough to start an alarm.

Georges Lefebvre
Introduction

Phantom Brigands of the Great Fear of 1789

On July 24th, 1789, panic struck the French region of southern Champagne. Rumors quickly circulated that a dangerous band of marauding brigands had been seen in the woods nearby. The clanging of the tocsin from parish bell towers proclaimed a state of emergency in the towns of Maizieres-la-Grande-Paroisse and Origny. According to one written account, three thousand armed townspeople gathered and mobilized to hunt down and stop the marauders; yet when they arrived at the suspicious patch of woods, they found that “the brigands were only a heard of cows.”1 The alarm had been false; but by the time the threat was found to be illusory, news of the original panic had reached other towns thirty miles away, generating additional alarms that would continue to spread fear throughout the region for the next week.

This original alarm was one of only four events that triggered scores of similar panics, which swept the countryside in the midst of the French Revolution between July 20th and August 6th, in what became known as la Grand Peur, or the Great Fear of 1789. Most occurred in a similar fashion to the episode above: the pettiest of incidents, aggravated by rumor and exaggeration, triggered an outbreak of hysteria and the conviction that brigands were coming to loot and pillage, usually leading to an armed mobilization. News of these alerts in turn spread to other localities, where the process was repeated, and the fear again relayed to the next town. The alarms were always in response to an imminent external threat: brigands, thieves, smugglers, soldiers; but such enemies were always nonexistent.

Why were entire towns so ready to take up arms at the slightest rumor of nearby threat? How could the distant rustling of cows stir up such a frenzy? In his extensive analysis *The Great Fear of 1789*, George Lefebvre suggests that intense social anxieties heightened general awareness of possible threat, to the point where anticipation boiled over into belief: “the slightest incident turned anxiety into outright fear and panic spread unhindered because everyone was expecting it.” But what sorts of anxieties could be so pervasive that they affect an entire population’s sense of vulnerability? And what kind of threatening object can seem to be anywhere, at any time, ready to strike, provoking constant heightened awareness?

The nearly simultaneous episodes of panic during that summer highlight the power of collective emotions to be acutely activated and take hold of a population in response to a specific, if complex set of social conditions. Fear and anxiety may feel immensely personal, but they feed off of the realm of the social, shaping and being shaped by the intricate political and social environments of the surrounding world. As a psychosocial and historical phenomenon, the Great Fear provides crucial insight as to how modern conditions of uncertainty and anxiety can give rise to acute episodes of fear.

In the summer of 1789, France was in the midst of a severe economic depression. After the harvest failed, the price of grain had skyrocketed. The former laborer had become the unemployed vagrant, wandering the countryside in search of food, begging passersby for a job or crust of bread, and occasionally raiding farms and cornfields, taking whatever crops could be found. The unemployed swarmed into the towns, and by the thousands into Paris. Suspicion grew among the

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peasantry that the aristocracy was inflating food prices by withholding their supplies from the market, and rioting over food prices became common.3

The anxieties of economic distress were augmented by the turbulent political climate of the Revolution. Rumors began to spread that the aristocracy and clergy were plotting a violent counterrevolution to thwart the revolutionary efforts of the Third Estate. Spreading outwards from Paris, suspicion turned to conviction that an army of “brigands” and foreign troops would be sent by the aristocracy to subdue the capital and restrain the provinces. This belief was lent credence by the streams of displaced workers moving en masse to the countryside, so that for many, the anonymous nomads of the depression became inextricably linked with the ominous threat of counterrevolution; in this context, brigands were doubly terrifying as both unknown vagrants and plausible agents of conspiracy. According to one provincial deputy:

No one knows who is responsible for this infamous idea of cutting down the unripe corn; the people can only believe it to be a plot hatched by the dying aristocracy … others fear the brigands are soldiers in disguise trying to trap and destroy the Paris militia. In any case, the damage is considered the work of the ministerial and aristocratic cabal.4

Additionally, since 1787, small-scale peasant uprisings against wealthy aristocrats, successful capitalists, and well-hated seigniorial châteaux had occurred with

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3 In more than a few municipalities, such “food riots,” sometimes accompanied by full-scale municipal revolutions, immediately preceded the Great Fear, in early July. See Charles Tilly, Contentious French (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1986), 243.
4 Lefebvre, Fear, 65.
increasing frequency in both city and countryside. Many of these burnings and lootings were also attributed in some capacity to brigands, equally by the unnerved common people and the terrified upper classes.

By mid-1789, awareness of the threat of brigands had become nearly universal; they were feared by rich and poor alike, and their actions were attributed to nearly every social ill that plagued the populace: the stripping of corn, inciting riots, the burning of chateaux, the robbing of carriages, and so forth. They were alternatively seen by different strata of the population as agents of the aristocracy, or of the Third Estate, or as mere delinquents sporadically lashing out violently. Their identities were characteristically unknowable, and their dispositions criminal—vagabonds, thieves, beggars, foreigners, highway robbers, and escaped slaves were all terms used to describe them.

Such outlier identities, and their perceived malicious intentions, set them apart in the collective imagination as a sub-population to be feared, distinct from the general public. In his work *The Ideology of the Great Fear*, Clay Ramsay points to usages of the term *brigand* that distinguish it from other notions of population and class, and mark the violence of the brigand as separate from the politically and economically oriented peasant uprising. On August 4, the duc d'Aiguillon articulated such a distinction to the National Assembly:

> It is not only the *brigands* who, arms in hand, want to enrich themselves in the midst of calamities, in several provinces the entire *peuple* form a sort of league to destroy

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5 Clay Ramsay, *The Ideology of the Great Fear* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). It should be noted that Ramsay’s study focuses only on the region of Soissonnais, though he does make the case that his findings should be generalizable to most areas of France during the Great Fear.
the chateaux, ravage the land, and above all to seize the archives where the titles to feudal properties are divided.\textsuperscript{6}

This semantic break does not reflect a mere official categorization of threat, but a general distinction that was rampant throughout contemporary discourse. Tilly reports that the bookseller Sébastien Hardy recorded his account of an incident in Paris on April 28, 1789 in these terms:

Parisiens had quite a scare… There was a sort of popular insurrection that extended from the faubourg [suburb] St.-Antoine to the neighborhood of Notre Dame. A considerable share of the workers supposedly from that faubourg, whipped into action by the brigands, attacked Reveillon, a very rich manufacturer of figured paper, and another rich individual…\textsuperscript{7}

The incident stemmed from a speech made by Reveillon on April 23, in which he lamented increases in the costs of production, and yearned for the days when workers could only be paid \textit{15} sous per day. Whatever the intention of his remarks, their result was immediate outrage among the wage earners of the faubourg. Before they were eventually suppressed by royal troops, the rioters had burned much of Reveillon’s house and sacked his paper factory.

Historical analyses of the event give little indication that the marchers were any more than angry proletarians upset at a man who had “gained the reputation of becoming very rich at workers’ expense”; further, those eventually tried and found guilty of “whipping up the crowd” were two local residents, a young male scribe at

\textsuperscript{6} Ramsay, \textit{Ideology}, 144.
\textsuperscript{7} Tilly, \textit{Contentious}, 232.
the Palais de Justice, and a forty-year-old female meat vendor. Were these two individuals the so-called brigands Hardy referred to, who were responsible for inciting the riot?

In truth, much of the violence and rioting attributed to brigands was committed not by criminals, but by ordinary peasants. According to Lefebvre, those masses of people referred to as brigands were in fact “the lower orders of both town and country driven to attack the ancien regime by sheer hunger and a profound conviction the king was on their side.” The identities of the individuals involved in one peasant uprising in the region of Mâconnais have been recorded, and included: “servants, journeymen from the vineyards, share-croppers, craftsmen and shopkeepers … laborers, farmers, millers and brandeviniers; many of them were landowners,” as well as several local government officials. As Lefebvre argues, the desperate conditions of the urban and rural poor made it inevitable that some wanderers would “slip into brigandage” by picking fruit off of trees, smuggling salt to avoid paying the salt tax, or occasionally looting. Likewise, while peasant revolts would inevitably involve excessive acts of pillaging and arson, these actions in no way represent a criminal brigandage that is innately separate from the economic and politically motivated revolts of the peasantry.

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9 In the words of Albert Mathiez, “the brigands whose imminent irruption haunted men’s imaginations could not as a rule be distinguished from the artisans who burnt the toll-gates and fixed the price of wheat in the market, or the peasants who forced their lords to give up their title-deeds” (*The French Revolution*, trans. Catherine Allison Phillips [New York: Russell & Russell, 1962] 51).
10 Lefebvre, *Fear*, 42.
11 Ibid., 177.
12 Ibid., 17.
If in the April 28th riots, the brigand was in fact the angry wage earner, aided by the urban unemployed, why then would Hardy attribute such mystical significance to that uprising of the proletariat? Why the need to assume that such a mobilization could only have been stirred up by “bands of vagabonds and foreigners,” and not simply active leaders of the frustrated wage earners? Furthermore, how can we explain the emergence of such a powerfully frightening threat that did not actually exist in the forms and to the extent that it was imagined?

* * *

We can identify here a two-sided process that allowed the brigand to seem to be everywhere at once: the nearly universal usage of the term *brigand*, despite its use in many different and often contradictory contexts, and as the pinning of the term to certain groups or individual bodies.

In Ramsay’s *Ideology*, he finds six principle situations to which the term *brigand* was applied: peasants in revolt; rioting over grain; robber bands; foreigners; poachers/hunters; and urban crowds rioting over taxes or other social issues. The brigand, as a singular threat to general social stability, did not materially exist. It was instead an element of discourse, a linguistic symbol that lived in the imaginations and through the words of the frightened populace. Symbols are representative: the *brigand*, more than a mere nebulous linguistic term, was a representation of deep social anxieties among the French people in the midst of revolution. Its makeup consisted of contemporary social woes: food shortages, class

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14 Ramsay, 138.
conflict, poverty; as well as oral histories and collective memory: depending on the locality, the brigand could be related to foreign invasion, ocean-faring pirates, or royal troops. Its existence was articulated by high authorities and lay people alike. These combinations of anxieties, histories, and expressions reveal the emergence of an amorphous discursive unity with the ability to be stretched, molded, and reshaped into fantastic forms and proportions: the brigand could come from the hills in armies of ten thousand, or alone from the nearby alleyway. Because it could adopt many forms, it could materialize anywhere. Some of these forms, such as the “aristocrat-brigand,” were, as noted by Lefebvre, “phantom figures.” While genuine acts of brigandage certainly occurred, the term took on symbolic proportions that inaccurately reflected any existential threat. In the situations where entire towns responded so fervently to the news of approaching brigands, it is impossible to know what each individual bearing arms or cowering in fright was exactly fearing. What is obvious however is the emotional power of the term brigand, and its mobilizing potential.

The imagined forms of the brigand often took on material substance. There seems to be a basic trend to the descriptions given by those who claimed to see brigands; this example, given by a toll-keeper outside Paris, is typical: “an immense multitude of suspicious-looking poor people clothed in rags had entered Paris just at that time…” What could be so suspicious about these people? Ramsay finds that one of the defining descriptive features of the brigand is that of being a stranger, and

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15 "It is clear that geographical location had its effect on popular imagination … but memories of books read in the past, old soldiers’ tales and oral traditions all played their part in these rumors." (Lefebvre, Fear, 160.)
16 Lefebvre, Fear, 210.
thus, strange; the suspected brigand is almost always a wanderer from somewhere else. Lefebvre notes that for the entire population, these were highly unstable times economically and socially. Jobs were being cut, workers were deserting their hometowns, and the roads literally filled with masses of the unemployed. Some of these then turned to robbery and smuggling as means of subsistence. It became impossible to determine among these strangers the difference between the genuine beggar and the professional bandit. As a result, certain signs were used as telltale indicators of a stranger’s intentions: “At La Chatre, the tocsin sounded for a third time because a patrol arrested an unemployed servant who was wandering around with neither money nor papers and who—obviously a feature bound to arouse suspicion—had a long beard.” At times, these signs were harder to read. For the militiamen searching for brigands in league with the aristocracy, interrogations were necessary: “In Nantes… anyone they did not know would be asked: ‘Are you for the Third Estate?’” However, Lefebvre notes that a certain amount of “passing” occurred, for those claiming to be utterly loyal to the Third Estate: “it was not too difficult to pass as a ‘patriot.’” Even the act of passing indicates that the identity of the brigand, unknown and formless as it was, had somehow become associated with a particular set visual signs that clung to the bodies of suspects.

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The common source of the anxiety that provided the background for the Great Fear, and that facilitated the ease of its spread, was profound social uncertainty. There had been mass panics in France before, local alarms that spread from town to town just

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18 Ramsay, Ideology, 77.
19 Lefebvre, Fear, 166.
20 Ibid., 88.
21 Ibid., 89.
as they did in the Fear; but historians seem to agree that no other panic spread as extensively, or had as profound a historical impact, as did the Fear in 1789. In 1703, a similar series of alarms broke out in response to news of Camisard Protestant rebels clashing with royal troops in Castres. As in the Fear, exaggerated reports had been circulating that large numbers of “fanatics” and “criminals” in the hilly region of Cévennes had “killed men, women, and children with incredible inhumanity, boasting that they would exterminate all the old Catholics of the region.” The panic spread from Castres a distance of at least forty miles, but remained isolated within the region.

The Great Fear, on the other hand, arose from four completely separate incidents in different locations nearly simultaneously between July 20th-24th, and spread outwards from there. The difference was that the fear of fanatical Camisards was primarily regional, and those suspected of being fanatics lived mainly in isolated communities in the hills. In 1789, the entire social fabric seemed to be unraveling, affecting the entire population. Social statuses seemed to be rapidly liquefying; the peasantry was in the midst of throwing off the last reins of feudalism, while becoming further proletarianized; new lines of alliance were drawn as the bourgeoisie became split between the aristocracy and the Third Estate; the depression was driving the former employed into mendicancy and thievery. Not only did unknown people suddenly become more visible just as reports increased of violence and unrest, but in their sheer numbers they seemed unable to be controlled by neither charity nor force. Uncertainty was so profound that any unknown person was deserving of the utmost suspicion, and the safest attitude seemed to be one of:

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22 Report from *La Gazette de France 24 March 1703*, quoted by Tilly, 175.
“it is possible that this man is a vagrant unworthy of attention, but on the other hand he could be the tool of some secret agents.”

It was this level of social uncertainty and its accompanying anxiety that allowed the threat of the brigand to materialize in the slightest dust cloud on the horizon, and in the visage of the common stranger. The threat was no longer one of calculable, defendable, foreign invasion—it was internal and ever-present. Furthermore, what Ramsay calls a portmanteau word, and what I will call the discursive unity of the brigand allows for the impression of a collective threat, with a singular objectivity and a definite sense of interiority/exteriority.

1789 marks one focal point in the decline of the old feudal order, engendering its own fissures of instability and particular threatening objects; yet the course of modernity has been to unleash other periods of transformation with their proper fears and fearful objects, which in their structures and formations bear perhaps more likeness than dissimilarity to the 1789 fear of brigands. In fact, the latter was only one of other similar early modern panics that erupted directly from the spread of modern capitalism, particularly, those throughout the Continent in 1848, in England during the early 19th century, and in France in the 1790’s.

Of notable similarity to the Great Fear was the panic generated by the rural “Swing” riots throughout England in 1830. Between 1750 and 1850, England underwent a “destruction of the peasantry,” to the point where the worker “became not merely a proletarian, but an underemployed, pauperized one.” Workers’ riots erupted periodically between 1790 and 1834, but the most significant episodes

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23 The words of a justice minister after arresting a “suspicious-looking” person. Lefebvre, Fear, 140.
occurred in 1830, after rural laborers began rioting and mysteriously breaking threshing machines. Rumors spread as to the exact identities of the “incendiaries” of the movement; while the perpetrators were in reality to be found among the local townspeople, many nearby observers came to the agreement that the culprits were outsiders. The most common linguistic signifiers became, notably, “stranger” as well as “smuggler,” “poacher,” and “Jew.”

It is striking that in both the “Swing” riots and the Great Fear, mythical outsider entities arose that masked the true reasons for unrest. The proletarian uprisings were not the work of strangers or criminals, but everyday citizens. A defining feature of uncertainty is that it demands the discovery—and if not, the imposition—of the certain. As Zygmunt Bauman has noted, such demand is perhaps a desire for “the relief we feel… when after a long time of uneasiness, anxiety, dark premonitions, days full of apprehension … we finally confront the real danger: a menace we can see and touch.” In the midst of unknowing, fear has a tendency to attempt to grasp what is not graspable. One of the questions we must answer is: how often are we confronting the real menace, and not one that has conveniently revealed itself? If for whatever reason it was easier for Sébastien Hardy to understand the origin of the Reveillon uprising as outside of the normal functioning of society, rather than inherent to it, how can we be sure that the stranger, the outsider whom we fear, is not often inherently related to ourselves?

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Societies gripped in the tension of fear often become highly turbulent. Alarms are sounded, panics erupt, and populations can be swift to target and prosecute any

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perceived adversaries. There is a certain organized confusion in fear that takes hold of collective energies, harnessing them in the general direction of the enemy, and mobilizing whatever action seems necessary in the name of self-defense. In times of intense social uncertainty, attempts to locate the true menace may come up short, calling phantoms into being, or projecting threats into and on the surfaces of the known environment. As such, it is crucial to understand in any collective fear how and why certain threats are identified in the ways they are, and the methods society may use to nullify the dangers they pose.

The revolutionary French countryside, with its networks of towns connected by mail courier and word-of-mouth, was to preview the 21st century global landscape of fear, in which new media technologies have become the primary modes of disseminating knowledge of threat. The uncertainties of those early modern times marked the dawn of a constant liquefaction of social relations that was to become the hallmark of the modern era in its entirety. A half-century after the Great Fear, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would poetically prophesy:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones ... All that is solid melts into air... 27

Indeed, since the late-20th century, scholars and writers have pointed to the presence of uncertainty and fear as a cultural constant of the times. In a rapidly networking world where the localized comforts of home are simultaneously disrupted and

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bombarded by unsettling information from around the globe, there can be, in the words of Bauman, “only one certainty— the certainty that tomorrow can’t be, shouldn’t be, won’t be like it is today.”28 Fear, in this world, is often the rule of the day; therefore any understanding of late modern life requires a thorough conceptualizing of how fear permeates and mobilizes the modern collective, particularly in relation to new media technologies and current politics of securitization.

The Great Fear of 1789— in its politicizations, psychosocial behaviors, and mechanisms of diffusion— appears strikingly similar to the current atmosphere of anxiety after the attacks of September 11, 2001. It stands as both a symbol and functional model for the fearful behavior of modern collectives; and may therefore be looked to, along with other historical episodes of collective fear, as the events of the current times demand to be deciphered and made clearer.

1 Collective Bodies: Systems of Fear

Uncertain futures, dim foreshadowings, blind curves: fear breeds in the foreseeable coming of the unforeseeable event. Uncertainty, or the possibility of some future disaster, is the essence of fear and anxiety. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman: “fear is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done.”

Anxiety has often been defined as the condition of being exposed to mere possibility. For Martin Heidegger, constant openness to the possibility of death meant that the natural state of the human is one of anxiety—we are a perpetual being-towards-death in a state of anxiety about our having-to-die. While the coming of death is a certainty, anxiety over its unknowable depths is the essence of life. Similarly, emotion for Heidegger is not merely subjective; it is the primary way we become human and participate in the world: the “fundamental way in which we are outside ourselves.” Brian Massumi refers to such a state of openness to potential as the virtual. In conditions of uncertainty, the “imm(a)(i)nence of the accident” reduces the human to a state of virtuality, or “condition of possibility.” From this perspective, fear as openness to potential is “the objectivity of the subjective”: the human transfigured into the sum-total of all possible futures.

33 Massumi, Politics, 11.
The virtual made actual: if uncertainty is ignorance, conscious rationalization
is an attempt at making up for ignorance by choosing if not an identity, then a
general way of conceptualizing, perceived threat. The mechanics of the modern
security state are perhaps the archetypal model of rational calculation in the face
uncertainty. In his lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Foucault describes
how the politics of securitization targets as its object of power the milieu— “the
space in which a series of uncertain events unfold.”34 Power is asserted by
controlling circulations of bodies, goods, information, and desire. Massumi identifies
a two-sided process by which power attempts to regulate uncertainty, consisting of
deterrence and determination.35 Deterrence is the rational calculation of probability,
of identifying the likelihood of future threat, and then preventing it from causing
harm. Determination is the pinpointing of the identity of future threat, of
actualizing a tangible object out of virtual circulations. Ulrich Beck has called the
politics of risk, of controlling unintended consequences, the “colonization of the
future.”36 Deterrence and determination act in conjunction to calculate potential
futures, identify threats, and act on them in the present. If the experience of the
world consists of exposure to milieus of open possibility, the basic mechanism of fear
can be understood as a rational colonizing of the future. Even in the most simple of
fears— as in the sudden encounter with a deadly snake—future possibilities are
quickly surmised, the threat is identified, and preventative action is taken. The

virtuality of unknown futures demands to be understood and acted on through the present.

Social psychologists have long pointed to “a human urge to convert vague uneasiness into definable concerns, real or imagined.” Yet when uncertainty is truly impenetrable, when what lies behind it can never be fully known, any attempt to unveil its mystery amounts to a shot in the dark, or the grasping of the ungraspable. Our proclivity for placing the loci of our fears within the known world often results in frustrated feelings of ineptitude, or the ascription of fear to objects that are unrelated, or fabricated. The pressing need of terrifying uncertainty to be understood has the ability to call the ghosts of future possibility into present being. As Bauman writes: “It is our response to anxiety that recasts somber premonition as daily reality, giving a flesh-and-blood body to a specter.” It is perhaps not surprising that Georges Lefebvre chose to refer to the fictional threat of the aristocrat-brigand as a “phantom figure”; sometimes it is necessary to concoct an appropriate object of fear when a more precise one is harder to pinpoint. Methods of creating the known out of the unknowable have come to play powerfully important roles in the everyday experience of an uncertain modernity; the emotions we come to recognize as fear or anxiety are more often than not dominated by specters—eruptions of the virtual that take on tangible forms within the social world.

**Uncertain Encounters, Magical Worlds**

The horrors of the future came crashing to earth for many Americans on October 30, 1938, when an evening CBS radiobroadcast reported that an army of aliens had

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38 Bauman, *Fear*, 133.
landed in rural New Jersey and planned to invade the country. Over a million listeners fled their homes while others prayed, telephoned loved ones, fainted, or were stunned into paralysis. The broadcast, however, was a fiction—a theatrical adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, directed and narrated by a young Orson Welles. Yet for those who reacted in terror, the play felt quite real. The faux news bulletin included seemingly authoritative announcements by a fictional Professor Pierson of the Princeton Observatory and the U.S. Secretary of State, as well as sound effects imitating a heated battle. Listeners who tuned in late received little explanation of the nature of the invasion, and no overt indication that it was fictional.

In an immediate follow-up study, psychologist Hadley Cantril interviewed over a hundred people who were frightened by the broadcast, and found a wide diversity of emotional reactions and interpretations of the threat. While the broadcast indicated that the vanguard of the invasion had landed in New Jersey, Welles raised the expectation that Martians would soon be arriving all over the country. The result was a blanket alarm call and terrifying uncertainty as to exactly if, where, and when disaster would strike. This heightened anxiety caused many listeners to reinterpret the world around them within the context of a Martian attack. As one man recounted, “I looked out my window and saw a greenish-eerie light which I was sure came from a monster. Later on it proved to be the lights in the maid’s car.”

Other listeners interpreted the broadcast as an invasion by a foreign army; according to several reports: “I felt the catastrophe was an attack by the Germans,

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because Hitler didn’t appreciate Roosevelt’s telegram”; “I was sure it was the Japanese. They are so crafty.” Cantril interprets these reactions as born from the social and political uncertainty of the times, as the respondents seemed to indicate: “Being in a troublesome world, anything is liable to happen.”

Arriving at similar conclusions to those of Lefebvre, he argues that social anxieties concerning impending war with Europe and Japan directly affected the content of individual fears. Cantril uses to the term standard of judgment to describe listeners’ preconceived notions of identities of potential threats; and upon the sounding of the alarm, these notions formed the basis for perception. Jean-Paul Sartre has written that in states of heightened emotion, “we magically ‘will’ certain qualities upon real objects: but those qualities are false,” even though they appear to be real. Emotional states result in a “complete alternation of the world.” Automobile headlights are suddenly the eerie glow of a monster; diplomacy in Europe has broken down into full-scale war. In Cantril’s understanding, when fear is schematized by particular standards of interpretation, the world can be shaped accordingly.

The ability for this orchestrated mass panic to alter the world of phenomena in particular ways illustrates the power of the collective alarm call; entire populations may be mobilized, but through which vectors, in what direction? How is a “standard of judgment” formed, and what is the extent of its power over the fearful consciousness?

40 In this paragraph: Cantril, Invasion, 158-60
Expressing the Virtual: The Inner Space of Fear

Cantril, like Lefebvre, understood anxiety to be a generalized, subtle emotion that may often remain unnoticed before “boiling over” into fear of a specific object. Indeed, while anxiety and fear are often used interchangeably, the most common distinction made between them revolves around the presence or absence of a focal object. As summed up by Freud: “Anxiety is related to the condition and ignores the object, whereas in the word Fear attention is focused on the object.”

Freud indicates that anxiety is often referred to as an objectless condition, one whose expression may be subtle, and which is often associated with physiological symptoms, whereas fear is generally described as an active, direct relationship with the fear object.

Freud’s description also implies that anxiety is often related to an object, even if it remains unrecognizable or unnoticed. This belief in a hidden presence of the origin of objectless anxieties has been supported experimentally. Psychologists have found that most people suffering from so-called free-floating anxiety are able to identify “thoughts or visual images” which accompany anxiety reactions, seeming to prove that the loci of anxieties can generally be identified.

Thus Lefebvre’s argument that during the Great Fear, French peasants were extremely anxious—consciously or not—about social concerns such as grain availability; this anxiety

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43 Cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “anxiety”: “The quality or state of being anxious; uneasiness or trouble of mind about some uncertain event; solicitude, concern/ The condition of agitation and depression, with a sensation of tightness and distress in the praecordial region/ A morbid state of mind characterized by unjustified or excessive anxiety, which may be generalized or attached to particular situations.” Available online at: [http://dictionary.oed.com](http://dictionary.oed.com).
was what directly led to extreme paranoia about the prospect of brigands raiding wheat fields.

Brian Massumi has provided an understanding of fear and anxiety that underscores the role of the two as socially constructed titles for differing gradients of feeling, thus questioning the relevance of any presence or absence of a true focal object. Borrowing from complexity theory as articulated by Prigogine, Massumi describes the body as a system effectively composed of potential sensation. Perception is no longer a matter of subjectively understanding the external world, but of passively taking in possible futures. The body “effectively absorbs possibilities, en masse, into its animated matter. Materially present possibility is potential.”45 The term “affect” as defined by Massumi denotes exactly this—“pre-conscious ‘visceral perception’ that is the condition of possibility of conscious perception.”46

This affective background state is what is sometimes referred to as one type of objectless anxiety, or bodily activation that is as yet pre-conscious, without being recognized, and thus without being assigned an origin or object. Not emotion, but rather unrealized irritation. Such anxiety is acknowledged after the fact, upon its becoming a sensation along the lines of: “I just realized how tense I’ve been lately.” For the current purposes, affect should be understood as unnoticed bodily agitation due to exposure to uncertainty, while anxiety is assumed to be consciously recognized, though still subtle and generalized.

Potential becomes actualized in sensation: out of pre-conscious activation emerges conscious feeling. Massumi uses the term “operative reason” to describe the

way the body “materializes an unpredictable futurity,” nonlinearly “choosing” a particular path that erupts in felt sensation.\textsuperscript{47} This amounts to a system in which feeling is not involved in a direct relationship between consciousness and the focal object of the feeling. Rather, feelings emerge probabilistically, out of a milieu of bodily potential for possible sensation: “out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously.”\textsuperscript{48}

There are, however, existing preordained patterns of sensation, which Massumi calls habit. Habit allows pre-conscious sensation to be easily recognized as feeling; its moment of eruption is its recognition. After the feeling has registered, it dissipates back into possibility, back within the realm of possible sensation. The relationship between affect and feeling is thus a circuit: affective potential through habit into feeling, and back again into possibility.

Emotion is one type of conscious understanding of habituated sensation. As opposed to pre-conscious potential, emotion is defined as, “a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience, which is from that point onward defined as personal.”\textsuperscript{49} From this perspective, emotions are inherently social, no matter how personal they seem. Massumi emphasizes that affect and the affections should not be confused with emotion; while the former operates on the level of pre-conscious, non-linear, probabilistic expression in sensation, the latter is a fully-conscious understanding of already-felt sensation, along pre-established socio-linguistic lines.

Fear and anxiety only become fully conscious emotion when they are

\textsuperscript{47} Massumi, “Event,” 154–6.
\textsuperscript{49} Massumi, “Autonomy,” 88.
recognized as such. Socio-linguistic fixing allows for the placement of sensation within a discursive category that “seems” appropriate for the emotion; one’s standard of judgment is then a habituated scheme for placing sensation. The identities of the initial stimulus or combination of stimuli that became absorbed materially no longer matter; out of milieus of possibility and uncertainty, the feeling of fear or anxiety emerges and demands to be understood. The process of understanding the reception of potentially dangerous stimuli has been understood by neurologists as a semi-conscious streaming of possibilities and possible identifications, which are then more finely understood, and selected from, by conscious processing.\(^5\) The oncoming truck in one’s peripheral vision, or the vague outline of a coat rack in the dark closet, are both registered as such after a brief moment of “selection.”

This distance between initial threat, its emergent sensation, and then its socio-linguistic association effectively cancels out the certainty of any linear relationship between stimulus and feeling-reaction. Causal objects can be deduced, and in many instances (as in the confrontation with a snake) the object of the fear may seem quite obvious; yet the relationship between threatening stimulus and fear-object-as-understood is probabilistic, and by no means definite. It then follows that fear can be attached to any object deemed appropriate, which can result in so-called displaced or irrational fears.

The *War of the Worlds* panic has often been referred to as irrational; fear was directed at non-existent aliens, Germans, and Japanese. Fear is generally deemed

“unreasonable” when “there is evidence that the object of fear does not exist or is different from what one believed it to be.” Cantril concludes that those listeners who did not feel fear reasoned their way through the scenario using “critical ability”; yet he also acknowledges that such abilities are hampered by feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. In fact, fear is repeatedly characterized as antithetical to reason; Heidegger proclaimed that one “loses one’s head” when afraid. Lars Svendsen comments on the tendency in fear for one to follow a given pattern of action, which “can overrule all rational considerations.” The cognitive-somatic break reduces reason to a matter of abiding by a habitual pattern of understanding affect, underscoring the importance of particular fear scripts. In this light, reactions to the War of the Worlds broadcast are not necessarily unreasonable: stimulated affect was understood within established discourses of threat, those of national security and war with Hitler. What matters is less the fact of any existential threat, and more the strength of dominant standards by which to comprehend disaster.

The lens of complexity theory therefore provides a link between collective affect, mass panic, and collective fear that differs slightly from the explanations provided by Lefebvre and Cantril. While the latter two have described widespread anxieties about particular social ills giving rise to fears specifically of those issues, Massumi indicates possibilities of transformation and discontinuity in the jump between affect and conscious fear. Affect then “boils over” into fear or anxiety, upon its recognition. Mass panic is the collective expression of extreme fear. The sounding of an alarm indicates that the possibilities of the future have come to roost.

52 Svendsen, Philosophy of Fear, 38.
53 Ibid.
in the present. As Lefebvre and Cantril both suggest, panic becomes all the more powerful with high accumulations of affect. Yet when the alarm is vague as to the true extent of the threat, and no narrative script can easily ground the content of fear, along what lines can it be recognized? How can affect be acknowledged as felt by the collective?

The Tocsin, Terror Codes, and Affective Modulation

The openness of the body to unknown possible futures produces affective responses; therefore, any blanket alarm call, or environment of potent instability will result in widespread affective accumulation. As opposed to narrativized public fear or outcry, the avenues through which collective affect is stimulated can move bodies along generalized, unpredictable lines of action.

Collective affect occurs via two routes: a slowly building generalized mass agitation, or what is often referred to as widespread objectless anxiety, and a quick-response abstract alarm call that immediately results in a buildup of affect. The former occurred in the economic and social uncertainties during the summer of 1789, which were palpable throughout the population, abstracted as a general feeling of insecurity. More recently, after the horrifying events of September 11, 2001, the possibility of another terrorist attack introduced levels of bodily anxiety in people’s lives that had not previously existed. The second route occurs through a specific unsettling event or alarm call, registering in magnitude, not content. The

54 Several polls after 9/11 found that behaviors such as trouble sleeping, inability to concentrate, nervousness when opening mail or flying airplanes were reported to have appeared after the attacks, indicating increased levels of bodily and emotional agitation. Cf. “The Consequences of Terrorism: Disentangling the Effects of Personal and National Threat.” Huddy, et al. Political Psychology, Vol. 23, No. 3, Special Issue: 9/11 and Its Aftermath: Perspectives from Political Psychology (Sep., 2002), pp. 485-509. Cf. Paul Recer, “9-11 Attacks Making Sleep Difficult.” Associated Press, April 2, 2002.
ringing of the tocsin, or the color-coded threat-level indicators instituted after 9/11, stimulates an urgent but vague sense of uncertainty that puts bodies immediately on edge.\textsuperscript{55} Often the two routes are interrelated: the alarm call overloads already intensified levels of generalized affect, catalyzing a collective process of naming and identifying causes: grain shortage, brigands, potential terrorist attack, etc. This is the collective bubbling over into fear from affect.

Massumi argues that the ability for populations to be simultaneously activated on a pre-conscious, somatic level drastically alters the role of fear in everyday life. In his 2005 work devoted to fear, he points to the importance of television as a mass medium used for what he calls \textit{affective modulation}—the heightening or lowering of affective intensity, or “the modulation of feeling, bodies react\textsuperscript{ing} in unison without necessarily acting alike.”\textsuperscript{56} Massumi argues that continuous alerts, in the form of vague indicators of increased threat, have raised affective anxieties to such a point that “fear can now operate as the nonphenomenal background of existence.”\textsuperscript{57} Patricia Clough summarizes how this occurs:

\ldots even when affect no longer propels or compels activation, that is, when fearful feeling has become the feeling fear, a content on the level of representation and narration \ldots there still is an excess of affect, a fringe of indeterminacy repeating as a remainder of anticipation. \ldots Here fearful feeling remains enveloped in its own potential, paralyzed in repetition of anticipation.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} “The whole population became a networked jumpiness \ldots in rhythm with leaps between color levels \ldots the population fell into affective attunement.” Massumi, “Fear,” 32.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. 32.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 44.
Constantly regenerating affect on the level of the population creates a background of potential, constantly actualizing into fear with barely the need for any logical reason to feel fear: intensified affect has become a “way of life, seeking only to grab attention.”

The possibility of affective modulation en masse on the basis of a constant background is for Massumi and Clough the product of high levels of uncertainty in the late modern era, recent trends in governance based on preemptive politics of fear, and new technologies that allow the wholesale affective modulation of populations. Modern technology has, however, only allowed for a more precise articulations with affect; recent events such as the terror code fluctuations actually represent an extreme form, a hyper-modulation, of the kind of collective affect that has occurred in other historical episodes like the Great Fear.

In 1789, accumulated affect was widespread throughout the population. Lefebvre notes that a “general feeling of uneasiness prevailed,” and constant alarm calls and warnings of brigands made some regions “particularly sensitive,” intensifying affect to the point where even the rustling of bovines could trigger an alarm. The ringing of the tocsin could be heard from miles away, or a cloud of dust from the gathering militia would be seen on the horizon. The exact origin of these abstract symbols of threat could not be known by those who witnessed them, but their message was clear: panic. It was often through these principally affective media of communication that the Great Fear was able to spread so quickly and in multiple directions simultaneously.

Once the news of distant alarms arrived, towns functioned similarly to the

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60 Lefebvre, Fear, 22-3
human body in states of fear: after brief moments of paralyzing panic, information would be gathered or deduced to determine the nature of threat, then militiamen would gather, and authorities would decide on the appropriate plan of action. Eventually panic would subside, even though affect still lingered: from potential, to feeling, to action, back to potential. The ringing of the tocsin, while more localized than terror alerts broadcast via television, nevertheless represents an early modern form of affective modulation resulting in a further accumulation of a nonphenomenal background of fear.

Massumi asserts that an affective trigger merely serves to activate, but that “it could not accurately determine what actions would be signaled forth.” While officials may declare a “state of emergency,” that would induce panic, “the social environment within which government now operated was of such complexity that it made a mirage of any idea that there could be a one-to-one correlation between official speech or image production and the form and content of response.”\(^{61}\) In the aftermath of 9/11, however, there were in fact apparent unified responses among the American public. While specific modes of action could not be predicted upon the announcement of increased threat, heightened affect was still registered as collective response to collective threat.

**Collective Fear Consciousness: Discursive Participation**

Collective fear can be a powerful force, mobilizing populations to fight wars, or convincing them to surrender their rights to the sovereign in the name of fear. 18\(^{th}\)-century philosopher Giambattista Vico theorized that early societies first achieved

\(^{61}\) Massumi, “Fear,” 34.
solidarity through an understanding of collective response to thunder. Mutual fleeing at the sounds of the heavens would have provided a common reference point around which to gather for support. As distinguished from mutual fear, in which attention is turned inward, the terror of collective fear is grounded in a sense of exterior threat, of mutual exposure to common danger.

Indeed, collective emotion has been defined broadly by psychologists as “emotions that are shared by large numbers of individuals in a certain society and are targeted at generalized out-groups or group-related events.” Fear on the collective level would then have two related dimensions: a shared emotional quality, and a mutual perception of the fear object as threatening. The question should be posed, however, as to what exactly about the emotion of fear can be fully shared? Must all members of the collective fear the same threat, in the same way?

Between October 2001 and March 2002, a series of national surveys explored Americans’ attitudes about the threat of terrorism in the wake of the attacks on September 11. The intention of the researchers was to determine how levels of fearful emotion regarding terrorism corresponded to perceived threat of future attacks. While the vast majority of respondents (86%) reported that they were at least somewhat “concerned… that there will be another terrorist attack on U.S. soil in the near future,” there was little correlation between these respondents and the approximately 50% who had felt “anxiety” in relation to “the terrorist attacks and

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the U.S. response” at least somewhat often.64 In other words, even the more fearful subset of respondents cannot be said to have perceived similar levels of threat.

Additionally, the two variables of perceived threat and anxiety were wrought with internal inconsistencies. The factor meant to determine “anxiety” was actually composed of four different feelings—frightened, scared, anxious, and worried—among which there was variation: respondents were divided across the spectrum as to how often they felt such emotions. Similarly, for the “perceived threat” factor, the respondents who indicated concern about future attacks seemed to have different perceptions as to just how immanent an attack might be.

This case of post-9/11 anxious emotion identifies serious empirical constraints for any definition of collective fear as shared emotion coupled with shared perception. Not only do populations experience different qualities and levels of fearful emotion with respect to mutual threat, but perceptions of threat differ in content as well. What then about collective fear can possibly be shared?

Experiences of fear can vary from person to person due to five basic differences: physiological responses (increased heartbeat, sweaty palms); the intensity of the feeling (terror versus mild agitation); the types of emotions felt in conjunction with fear (embarrassment versus pleasure); the identity of the fear object; and perception of the fear object as threat.65 The first three differences are innately personal, and cannot be fully shared; even in relation to the same object,

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64 “Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies.” Huddy, et al. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Jul., 2005), pp. 593-608. The “perceived threat” dimension included three questions about concern for future attacks, while the “anxiety” dimension included the four specific emotional questions, as well as another asking whether the 9/11 attacks have “shaken your own sense of personal safety.” These two factors had a correlation of .57.

individuals all experience fear in different ways. There is also no guarantee of agreement between perceptions of how dangerous a particular threat is. The single external factor that may functionally bind fear between two or more individuals is the perceived identity of the fear object.

In the above study, the feelings reported in the poll had already been quantified, identified, and categorized as relating to a particular object—the “terrorist attack.” Upon the suggestion of particular emotions (anxiety, fright, worry, fear) each respondent had to re-place her remembered sensations in their appropriate category and context. While respondents differed in their explanations for their individual feelings, and their understandings of the extent of the already-declared fear object, what they held in common is two-fold: the experience of being affected, and their understanding of that affectivity in terms of the terrorist attack. To use the example provided by Vico, mutual exposure to thunder, and then consensual identification of the sky as the origin of the sound, comprise the full experience of shared fear: mutual, unplaced and unqualified affect, and then collective recognition.

While widespread affect certainly plays an important role in the precipitation of large-scale panic and fear, collective fear only becomes recognized as such through its conscious perceptions of the shared fear object, in the way threat is discussed, and the actions consciously taken to counteract it. For every heightening of the threat indicator, media buzz circulates as to the nature of the threat. During every period of economic crisis, opinions are expressed speculating reasons for the decline. Societal fears have their proper buzzwords, theories, and factions. Collective fear is therefore truly collective not through similar degrees of emotion, and not
simply in the identity of a shared fear object, but through participation in a common discourse of fear and threat. Those respondents to the post-9/11 study did not all fear the terrorist attack in the same way, but each knew precisely what was meant by the idea of being afraid in relation to a potential terrorist attack.

Discourses of common fear necessarily include articulations of interiority/exteriority, and the establishment of group identity in opposition to exterior threat. Georg Simmel argued that group identities are formed through a combination of positive associations (similarities, harmonies with others) and negative associations (distancing oneself from outsiders). The effect of this “dualism” is the production of identity:

We think we have, or are, a whole or unit which is composed of two logically and objectively opposed parties, and we identify this totality of ours with one of them, while we feel the other to be something alien which does not properly belong and which denies our central and comprehensive being.

Similarly, political theorists from Thucydides to Machiavelli have noted that fear plays an important role in the establishment of alliances, political groups, and societies, often galvanizing factions to group together in solidarity against a common enemy. More recently, George W. Bush evoked this age-old strategy with his now-famous proclamation, “either you are with us, or you are with the

67 Simmel, “Conflict,” 16 (footnote).
terrorists.” Group identification out of fear has a tendency to re-draw boundary lines; linguistic and visual signs emerge as indicators of allegiance, differentiating bodies and factions from the collective that are seen to be directly tied to that which threatens. These distinctions operate and are communicated on the discursive level, becoming appropriated into broader dialogues and understandings of common threat.

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There is thus a certain unifying ability for the collective, in its relationship to the fear object, and its group identity formations, to appear as a solidified, single unit. How do such understandings come about? How could whole populations of people come to believe that they all lie in the path of a common threat? In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Emile Durkheim proposes a theory for understanding how concepts and perceptions can be shared by entire societies. Collective representations, according to Durkheim, are concepts that arise from and are shared through the social things experienced by the collective whole. As such, they are “as concrete representations as an individual could form of his own personal environment.” Because they emerge from the social realm, they maintain an ideality that is a genuine reflection of the values and makeup of the society; they therefore exist objectively, in “harmony with the nature of things.” While collective representations are usually understood by the individual in personalized ways, such understandings distort and pervert the concept’s pure ideality. Collective

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71 Durkheim, “Representations,” 95.
representations also correspond to a distinct materiality: they “can only become conscious of themselves … by fixing themselves upon external objects.”

Collective fear often operates as if it were a true Durkheimian representation; no matter the complex realities of a threatening situation, the subjects of fear discourse operate as stable unities. As Simmel notes, conflict or mutual fear is reflected in stable formations of in-group and out-group. Despite the long-term fluctuations of group identities and membership, popular myths emerge during times of fear and war that claim to reflect, in Durkheim’s words, the nature of things: simple and clear narratives arise as to the origin of the threat, its identity, and its reasons for existing. Common threat seems to be self-evident in the visible landscapes of fear: national boundary lines demarcate fears of invasion; racially-based fears take the most obvious phenotypic markers as signs of division; the ragged clothes and unpredictable movements of the unemployed in 1789 gave credence to their identification as brigands. Totalizing group identities also appear solidly monolithic. As the Stranger in Plato’s Statesman says of the “division” that most Greeks made at the time: “they separate the Hellenic race from all the rest as one, and to all other races … they give the single name “barbarian”; then, because of this single name, they think it is a single species.”

The glue that binds individual perceptions together is not in fact a simultaneity of conceiving “the facts of experience,” but is instead, language. In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault proposes a conception of language that

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73 Cf., Evrigenis, Fear, 17.
74 Evrigenis, Fear, 46.
disengages its content and formations from their relation to fact.\textsuperscript{75} Ideas, concepts, and objects are not culturally fixed and have no objective permanence; instead, all current knowledge is located within a specific *episteme*, which Foucault understands as the set of conditions for any statement or idea to be possible. The episteme is the limitless, yet ordered, body of knowledge relating to a particular discourse, and is not necessarily bounded by periods of time. Concepts and objects are not defined in relation to ideas and things, but to the system of their possible expressions; certain concepts appear to be fixed, and become legitimate concepts of discourse not because they embody a certain essence “in harmony with the nature of things,” but because they fall within particular discursive parameters, or rules of formation.

Following Foucault, discourses of fear, with their terrifying objects, group identities, and common perceptions, are unstable; they are contingent upon their particular enunciations, and subject to transformations and discontinuity. Collective fear may be a mutual participation in discourse, but any personal understanding, or individual enunciation of threat is necessarily meta-stable, subject to shift. An object of fear may rear its material head— in public demonstrations, or grainy taped videos— but when it is evoked within threat discourse, its articulation is “endowed with a certain modifiable heaviness, a weight relative to the field in which it is placed, a constancy that allows of various uses…”\textsuperscript{76}

These discourses of fear and threat comprise the scripts that guide the socio-linguistic placement of affect, and allow it to be shared. Cultural narratives of Nazi invasion formulated understandings of the Orson Welles’ broadcast, just as popular


\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 105.
understandings of brigands became the rallying focus for French townspeople during the Great Fear. If Massumi is correct that affective modulation cannot predict exact patterns of action, populations still tend to participate in and to latch onto particular standards of threat discourse that appear unified, but allow for significant fluctuation. Foucault’s analysis shows how it is possible for people, “within the same discursive practice, to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions, and to make contradictory choices.” 77 Furthermore, “each discourse contains the power to say something other than what it actually says, and thus to embrace a plurality of meanings.” 78

The language of fear and threat within a culture, like any other language, is composed of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure taught over a century ago that a sign’s meaning relies on an arbitrary relationship between “signifier,” and “signified,” that is culture-relative. 79 Within a given society, he argued, the meaning of any sign is fixed, and is communicated through the symbolic or linguistic form of the signifier. The signifier in its uses and circulations through discourse thus carries with it both the meaning and any feelings associated with the sign.

Within discourses of fear, certain signifiers tend to act as substitutes for the material presence of a threat. While in 1789 the signifier brigand could do nothing but symbolize the violence that any material brigand actually posed, a single articulation of the word itself was enough to call whole towns to arms. It could be argued that what the people of Origny or La Chatre were really fearing were the implied catastrophic signifieds—the burnings and lootings that were to come. And

77 Ibid., 200.
78 Ibid., 118.
yet, as Clay Ramsay has shown, *brigand* was a portmanteau word; it could be used in several contexts to convey different meanings.\(^\text{80}\) While brigands were generally understood as things to be feared, their exact identities were enigmatic; with each articulation, the specific nature of the threat had the opportunity to be re-understood in different contexts. Therefore while fearful feeling may have come from the anticipation of threat, with all of its consequences and possible futures, the active fear-inducing agent within discourse was the signifier itself. These fear signifiers—be it a *terrorist attack, invasion, or hurricane*—become principal objects of fear discourse, and the primary symbol for referring to that which is feared. Foucault’s understanding of language departs from that of Saussure in his assertion that meaning is derived not from a culturally determined relationship within the sign, but from the enunciative field in which it is articulated. Therefore any meaning derived from the use or articulation of a fear signifier can fluctuate, depending on its context within a particular statement, and then among the web of statements that surround it.

Lars Svendsen has recently suggested that, “our fear … seems to an ever decreasing extent to be based on our own experiences.” It is understandable why Svendsen, writing in 2007, would characterize modern fears as heavily mediated through time and space, as he explains: “How many of us have been exposed to a terrorist attack, violence from strangers, been seriously ill as a result of food additives or a new virus?”\(^\text{81}\) New media technologies have significantly increased the extent to which individuals may learn about potential threats, and thus paranoia


\(^\text{81}\) Svendsen, *Fear*, 20.
seems to be increasingly diverted or displaced onto threats that may actually pose no real danger to the individual. I am suggesting that there is nothing inherently new to fear as removed from personal existential experiences of danger, and as mediated via discourse. Moreover, the experience of discursively mediated fear is a personal experience, through what Massumi calls the affective fact: “Threat triggers fear. The fear is of disruption. The fear is a disruption.”\textsuperscript{82} If an announcement by Orson Welles of an invasion on the homeland, or the spreading of rumors of nearby brigands, can incite panic, then it is the autonomy of fear, in its movements and fluctuations, and not necessarily threat, which may cause the most disruptions of widespread terror.

For this reason, the language of fear itself demands to be understood. The articulation of fear signifiers is central to any collective understanding of threat; as Ramsay has written, it was the specific dynamics of the language used in 1789 that allowed people to “concert vast activities together, the Great Fear among them.”\textsuperscript{83} While brigands may have been the central signifier of fear during those times, most periods of collective panic have their own proper linguistic expressions. These expressions embody the varying possibilities for collective fear; they are characterized by transformations, freedoms, and limits; and reveal ways in which knowledges, worlds, and populations can be created and re-created through shifting dynamics in the language of threat.

\textsuperscript{83} Ramsay, \textit{Ideology}, 123.
2 Superpredators and Domestic Terror

In November of 1995, an article published by *The Weekly Standard* proclaimed the emergence of a new threat to the American public: the “super-predator.” According to the article’s author John J. DiIulio, superpredators were “hardened, remorseless,” pre-teenage boys, who had renounced mere mischief to instead “kill or maim on impulse, without any intelligible motive.” DiIulio then cited a host of crime and demographic statistics, indicating that while the streets weren’t yet crawling with these killers, the real threat was “what's just around the corner—a sharp increase in the number of super crime-prone young males.”

DiIulio’s portrayal of this “new breed” of violent youth combined statistical calculation with ambiguity in a way that left all of the details uncertain, but allowed for the most horrid possibilities imaginable. He claimed to be “able to calculate with precision” the appearance by the year 2000 of “at least 30,000 more murderers, rapists, and muggers on the streets than we have today.” Such overwhelming numbers were compounded by the absolute unpredictability of their appearance: “While the trouble will be greatest in black inner-city neighborhoods, other places are also certain to have burgeoning youth-crime problems that will spill over into upscale central-city districts, inner-ring suburbs, and even the rural heartland.” They will come en masse, and they will be everywhere.84

The article, and a follow-up book coauthored by DiIulio, catalyzed a wave of media attention, academic research, and political discussion about how to combat the

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threat of “deeply troubled and violent children.”85 The slightest reports of youth
delinquency, along with bone-chilling tales of children dropping toddlers out of
windows, were broadcast to the public within the frame of this growing trend of
violence.86 The resulting panic had far-reaching consequences: the American juvenile
justice system was widely revised over the course of the decade, and new initiatives
at curtailing youth crime were initiated, including the implementation of tougher
sentences for young offenders, as well as youth curfews in cities across America.87

At the heart of the discussion was the term, originally coined by DiIulio,
“superpredator” (which had quickly become de-hyphenated after its initial
publication). As a fear signifier, the word had captivating power—“shock value,” as
one reporter put it. The mere prevalence of the term was enough to convince some
that the threat was real.88 Only one month after DiIulio’s initial article was
published, the Chicago Tribune reported:

The phrase "superpredator" has the power to spread like brushfire from the ‘think tank’ of
the Brookings Institution, to the pages of the Chicago Tribune, to the talk shows of Ricki
and Geraldo, to politicians who will use it to whip caring citizens into a frenzied war cry…89

By the end of the nineties, however, the theory of the superpredator wave
had been debunked. Youth crime rates had plummeted instead of skyrocketing—

85 Don Terry, “Prison for Young Killers Renews Debate on Saving Society's Lost,” The New
87 Mike Males, Kids & Guns: How Politicians, Experts, and the Press Fabricate Fear of Youth
Times, May 9, 1996, B1.
and the decrease was not attributed to preventative measures taken in response to DiIulio’s theory. In February 2000, The U.S. Department of Justice acknowledged that the “myth” had “caused a panic,” but declared that there was “no evidence for a new breed of juvenile superpredator.” DiIulio has even renounced his initial warnings, claiming he drew the wrong conclusions, albeit from “correct” data. According to many journalists and criminologists, “the superpredator never materialized.” In fact it, it did; it materialized in words as a stable object of fear discourse, and on the bodies of the boys whom the label stuck to. Instead of giving a name to a developing phenomenon, DiIulio had created a name that became a phenomenon of its own.

The “superpredator” as linguistic signifier has not completely vanished from the discourse of crime, though it has taken on new meanings in light of its refutation. A rough Google News Archive survey of news articles and other media available on the Internet indicates that since the turn of the century, the appearance of the term in the media has steadily declined. Even by the late nineties, “superpredator” appeared primarily in the context of its disproval, and the term is now almost singularly used to refer to itself as a previous signifier of threat.

As with the brigand in 1789, the superpredator was a phantom figure—first and foremost a discursive signifier, invoking fear through its potential significations. Yet America in 1996 was decidedly not 18th-century revolutionary France; gangs of gun-toting teenagers would seem to pose different dangers than malicious

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90 Males, Kids, Ch. 4.
92 http://news.google.com/archives: a search entry of “superpredator” from Jan. 05 to Jan. 09 yields forty-six occurrences of the term in the context of youth crime; every instance refers to the signifier as a debunked relic from the panic of the nineties.
vagabonds accused of raiding cornfields—yet how different? Both threats were in fact imagined to arise from within the general population, roaming through town and countryside, threatening brutal violence towards family and places of residence. Furthermore, both signifiers of fear came to prominence powerfully, if briefly, as linguistic manifestations of accumulating social anxieties. The power of the brigand as a primarily linguistic signifier cannot therefore be reduced to an anomaly of early modern times. Indeed, the life and death of the superpredator signifier bears striking resemblance in almost every capacity to that of the brigand. These two are certainly not the only, or even the most prominent fear signifiers throughout the course of modernity to grip a population in fear. Yet their similarities which span over three hundred years suggest a certain constancy to the mechanisms of collective fear operating among moderns; highlighting the abilities of fear knowledge to mutate and shift, in particular relations to the media technologies of the era.

Mediations of Fear

Media of all types are crucial to the circulation of discourse; they form the very substance of its articulation. As Michel Foucault wrote, any statement “is always given through some material medium,” whether it is a voice, a surface, or even a memory trace.93 The meaning of the statement depends to a large degree on its particular materiality; it therefore has the potential to shift between re-articulations within different media. Any juxtaposition of multiple forms of media allows statements to continue to shift in their significances as they circulate through discourse.

93 The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York, Pantheon, 1972; translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith), 100.
As pioneering media theorist Marshall McLuhan once wrote, “Any understanding of cultural and social change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.”93 Indeed, the Great Fear as a historical event could not be understood without respect to its transmission through rumor, written letters, official pronouncements, and the sounding of the tocsin. The latter is of crucial importance, not only for its ability to communicate the presence of threat, but also for its purely affective function, or ability to affect as-of-yet-preconscious bodily activation. In this sense, media work both to shape discourse and to heighten levels of non-narrative affect, both of which are equally important in contouring collective fear.

An Eruption of Affect
In the 1990’s, the primary medium for transmitting almost any sort of cultural information in America was television. For this reason, the superpredator phenomenon was shaped almost in its entirety through television’s intervention. DiIulio’s announcement in November 1995 was not an introduction of the subject of youth violence within the mainstream media; in the weeks and years prior, television news had frequently broadcast reports juxtaposing graphic violence with children. Two stories had garnered extreme media attention: one in 1993 on Halloween when three trick-or-treaters were mistakenly killed by gang members, and another in 1994 when two boys (aged ten and eleven) dropped five-year-old Eric Morse out a window.95 These stories and others like them dominated the news waves at the time,

and were often referenced and re-circulated by the media for months after their occurrences.

While television reports certainly aided in spreading narratives of youth violence in the nineties, Richard Dienst provides an analysis of TV as a technology that articulates with sub-individual affective capacities, and is capable of producing affective value. He treats television not as a mode for transmitting meaning or ideology, but as a continuous procession of “time-images.” When viewers are exposed to images they’ve already seen, the image-unit is freed from content, and becomes merely an expression of time. “The work” of television watching becomes “productive when viewers merely attend, are merely bodily engaged with the passing of images, one after another.” Dienst figures such time passing as virtuality: “pure potential for actualization or invention,” where the rules “are not those of representation [or] narrative.” As Massumi suggests, passive image reception intensifies affect not in relation to content. The progression and repetition of televised images of crime should then not be seen as necessarily producing conscious fear of the type of events reproduced on-screen. Rather, the result is a heightening of unnarrativized affect. As with Massumi’s analysis of post-9/11 televised terror alerts, what is displayed in the pre-recorded evening news broadcast is a re-evoking of all-too-familiar alerts, where content is replaced by quantitative indexes of severity: how bad, how threatening.

If televised crime in the nineties contributed to a heightened level of generalized affect, the superpredator still cannot be said to be the only form of its

discursive recognition; in fact the nation was already buzzing with talk of crime before DiIulio’s article. In a 1994 Gallop poll, sixty percent of those surveyed said they favored the death penalty for teenage murderers—over five times as many as in the 1960’s.98 Teenage violence was already recognized as a potential threat, and the public was clearly alarmed. The appearance of DiIulio’s article, entitled “The Coming of the Super-Predators,” centralized fear on specific discourses of teen violence. It immediately spawned a wave of panic that channeled general fears into modes of preventative action, such as reforming the juvenile penal system. A parallel could appropriately be made with the events of 1789: DiIulio’s announcement became the clanging tocsin for crime fears, confirming not only the possibility, but provoking a full-scale alarm of the real imminence of child killers—“in the flesh.”

Yet the “coming of the superpredators” was not an event of arrival, as much as it was one of transformation. DiIulio may have given form to a specter of affect, but it did not arise in a vacuum. Rather, the superpredator emerged as a positivity—an eruption within current discourse as a particular set of possibilities and concepts.99 Its linguistic signification represents a molding of threat discourse hailed into being by uncertainty; anxieties over general reports of youth violence were made startlingly acute within this new frame. After the article’s publishing, previously reported episodes, such Eric Morse’s death, were suddenly recast as part of the superpredator phenomenon.100 The same TV reports that had stoked general fears of youth violence continued to reinforce the theme by capitalizing on DiIulio’s theory.

98 Glassner, Fear, 71.
99 Foucault uses positivity as a sort of catch-all term to describe the visible aspects of a discursive formation, as opposed to statement which implies a unity based on points of discontinuity, and implies what may be unsaid, hidden. I find the term particularly useful for its effective emphasis of a presence, or prominence. Cf. Foucault, Archeology, 125.
100 Annin, “Superpredators.”
This heightened sense of urgency occurred not only through television news but in general articulations of everyday safety as well. The transformation can even be seen in the difference between Bill Clinton's comments on crime in his 1995 and 1996 State of the Union Addresses. In January 1995 he declared, "I know the members of this Congress are concerned about crime, as are all the citizens of our country," with no mention of youth violence. One year later, his tone had changed: “I'm directing the FBI and other investigative agencies to target gangs that involve juveniles in violent crime, and to seek authority to prosecute as adults teenagers who maim and kill like adults.”

The emergence of the superpredator, like that of the brigand, was an eruption of affect into fear—an actualization of future potential into current reality. In the *War of the Worlds* panic, uncertainty regarding the identity of the threat, coupled with what Cantril describes as preexisting anxieties, allowed listeners of the broadcast to place their fearful feeling onto quite a few different fear scripts, which included repressive action “against the Jews,” or Japanese invasions. Yet all of these explanations had preexisted before the panic; they were available scripts for making sense of the experience. Similarly, Lefebvre describes the result of a particular series of warnings about brigands: “Now that the brigands had as it were been formally announced, they seemed to be appearing all over the place.”

Superpredators or brigands, the introduction of a conscious narrative into an

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101 Presidential State of the Union address, as delivered, January 23, 1996. Online at: [http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/P/bc42/speeches/sud96wjc.htm](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/P/bc42/speeches/sud96wjc.htm)


environment of affect has the awesome power of materializing quite believable threats within collective discourse.

**Threat Knowledge: The Possibilities of Fear**

Every collective threat has as an identity that is separate, but related to its material instantiation, one that lies in the field of its collective understandings. While the superpredator may have been a fiction, and could therefore only truly threaten to cause violence through its linguistic articulation, even threats that pose actual, immanent danger to the collective have their own proper existences on the level of discourse. During the chaotic summer of 1789, it is true that some episodes of brigandage did occur, and the violence of peasant revolts was far from imaginary; yet the threat of brigands as imagined and proclaimed among the French people often took forms entirely distinct from the realities of any existential danger.

The discursive fear object maintains a type of limited autonomy in relation to its material forms. According to Foucault, it is certainly possible for linguistic forms to be shaped “in correlation with ‘external’ events,” but he contends that discursive analysis must always “show on what condition a correlation can exist between them.”104 In other words, any relationship between perceptions of a fear object and the existential threat it poses cannot be taken as direct or given. Even the identity of the superpredator, without any formal materiality, was still affected by “external” events, such as further incidents of youth violence propagated by the media. Yet from the perspective of the group, the identity of the fear object as understood is coexistent with its discursive reality; any “external” movements and intentions of

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104 Foucault, *Archaeology*, 168.
the threat cannot be relevant until they somehow enter into collective understandings.

As a result, all knowledge of a threat is necessarily rooted in its linguistic and symbolic representations. In the case of the superpredator, the extent of public knowledge of the threat was directly related to the extent to which it was discussed. The more discussion of predatory youth there was in newspapers, radio, and daytime television shows, the more the phenomenon seemed real. “Citing the growing use of the term superpredators,” the New York Times reported in May 1996, a lawyer for the city announced to a group of colleagues: "it's time -- we must prepare for the onslaught of juvenile violence.”

Foucault writes that discourse and knowledge are mutually derived from one another: “There is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms.” The very articulation of concepts and signifiers reifies their existence within knowledge, although their precise articulation does not constitute knowledge’s limit: Foucault maintains that “knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse.” The reach of a threat as perceived and understood can therefore be far beyond that of any existential reality. The plasticity of discourse allows fear to roam in zones of possibility, in futures that have yet to actualize.

The production of threat knowledge is not, however, without limits. For Foucault, the possibilities of emergence of any statement are governed by certain “rules of formation”; within these boundaries, however, variations may be limitless. Following this notion, if DiIulio’s initial descriptions of the superpredator can be

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105 Purnick, “Metro.”
106 Both quotations in this paragraph are from Foucault, Archaeology, 183 (emphasis mine).
taken as guidelines for its conditions of existence, the possibilities of modifying and expanding knowledge of the threat seem endless. DiIulio’s phantasm was originally defined only by his age and sex—young, male, and that he comes from a background of “moral poverty.” Beyond these constraints, he could materialize anywhere at anytime, committing any number of violent acts.

Any and all perceptions of the superpredator could therefore appear valid as long as they existed within these bounds. Television in particular played a crucial role in suggesting possible modulations of the threat. In June 1996, the Baton Rouge Advocate speculated: “Do you remember the news report concerning the 6-year-old who practically beat a 4-week-old infant to death? It seems that the super predators are getting younger and younger.”

If younger children appear to be accruing the marks of the superpredator, it is because the limits of discourse allow them to do so.

Similarly, throughout the mid-nineties media reports consistently portrayed violent youth, within the context of superpredators, as people of color. While nothing inherent to the concept of the superpredator mandated that most of them would be Black or Latino, public depictions of superpredators were often painted as such, and racialized perceptions could easily be drawn from the way the threat was framed. As one 1998 study put it: “the clear but unspoken subtext of the superpredator thesis is that a disproportionate number of criminal youth are from racial minority groups.” The researchers concluded that racialized presentations of the youth threat solidified some of the public’s understanding of superpredators as primarily Black or Latino, albeit along predictable demographic lines; white participants found the superpredator to be more frightening if shown as a minority.

while minority respondents were more likely to find them less terrifying.\textsuperscript{108}

\textbf{The Constancy of Threat Discourse}

Discrepancies within collective perceptions of threat do not undermine the consistency of discourse; in fact, for Foucault, contradiction operates within discourse as “an organizing principle … the very law of its existence.”\textsuperscript{109} Inconsistencies are intrinsic to the multiple forms and understandings a particular discursive object might take; no object can be understood in the same way by every person, and the same object may contain internal contradictions that allow it to take multiple forms. For this reason, the superpredator, as with the brigand in 1789, was a shape-shifter: it contained particular racial associations for some, but not everyone; it could be singularly urban, or distinctly suburban.

Furthermore, throughout all its possible manifestations, the signifier maintained a distinct unity. For the amount of discourse surrounding the superpredator as threat, there was an equal amount of discussion of the superpredator as a mere mythical signifier; many politicians, pundits, and newsreaders never believed the theory to begin with. Yet as an object of discourse, “superpredator” operated fluidly as a stable signifier on the tongues of believers and nonbelievers alike.

If it were not due to the very malleability of language and knowledge, collective fear would not be able to retain its grip on a population. Discontinuity is precisely what allows large-scale fears to appear as collective representations. It is


\textsuperscript{109} Foucault, \textit{Archaeology}, 151.
also the functional method by which fear as a protective mechanism enables a society to react in concert to a given threat. This function can only be understood if fear is seen as discursive participation; the glue that holds collective fear together cannot originate within the psyche alone, and must therefore reside in the web of contradictions that bind together discursive formations.

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If collective threat perceptions tend to be coextensive with the possibilities of its discursive articulations, uncertainty is the driving force behind the continuous expansion of this knowledge. Sociologists who have studied American trends of fear in the late 20th century often point to television and the news media as infusing Americans’ consciousness with stories designed to provoke fear.110 But as Lars Svedsen asserts, “this culture has only been able to develop because we are susceptible to this form of logic … We are born into a world we cannot control, and seem to be consigned to existential uncertainty throughout our lives.”111 It is then the power of uncertainty, and our demand for attaining whatever knowledge can be grasped, that gives cultural narratives like the superpredator their credence. This case of the superpredator exemplifies the power of media, in this case television, to stoke affect and social anxiety, and to spread panic along the lines of a particular script. Sociologist David Altheide has called this “the creation of fear.”112 In so far as news media provide both an alarm call and narrative structure for the placement of previously sub-individual affect, Altheide’s description is correct: fear becomes actualized out of potential. Yet the abilities of media elite to stretch and contribute

112 Altheide, *Creating Fear*. 
to discourses of threat are related as much to the plasticity of discourse— and the
driving power of uncertainty— as intentional fear mongering in the name of market
exploitation. Creation is therefore a matter of creating room for possibility, of
positing a vague threat whose details may be filled in as its identity expands.

As Barry Glassner points out in his 1999 book *The Culture of Fear*, the
superpredator phenomenon was not an anomaly: “every few months for the past
several years it seems we discover a new category of people to fear.”113 He suggests
that “premillennial tensions” provided a background of anxiety (in Massumi’s terms,
affect) that demanded to be actualized, or made tangible. While he doesn’t define the
exact nature of these tensions, Glassner does provide convincing evidence for what
appear to be consistent eruptions of affect throughout the mid-nineties in the form of
various discursive fear objects (in his terms, “monster moms,” “killer kids,”
“metaphoric illnesses,” among others). If it is true that television provides certain
avenues for knowledge production, then the possibility exists for these objects to be
continuously modulated, creating what appear to be material transformations in the
nature of threats.

The above schematic of collective fear— as the product from uncertainty and
heightened affect, and constituting a particular knowledge that is subject to
modulation through discourse— should not be restricted to the 1990’s. In 1789, not
only did the brigand emerge as a powerful discursive fear signifier, but it was subject
to similar shifts and modulations as the superpredator, both unplanned and
purposefully manipulated. Lefebvre notes several key nodes of distortion within the
patterns of the Fear’s transmission, including “governmental despotism”— the

113 Glassner, *Fear*, xiii.
intentional stirring up of public fear in order to maintain support.\textsuperscript{114} The lack of centralized accurate information only exacerbated the problem: “The writer of a letter would most often set down information that was sheer hearsay.” Generally, the atmosphere of misinformation and rumor “favored the spread of false reports, the distortion and exaggeration of fact, and the growth of legends.” And just as TV reports in the 1990’s served to reiterate perceptions of youth criminals, “in due course, the rumor would reach the ears of a journalist who would imbue it with new strength by putting it in print.”

**Plasticity and Interaction**

Discursive unities of fear do not only transform in their appearances and identifying characteristics internally— that is, with respect to their unique position as a particular object of discourse. They also have the ability to interact and mingle with other unities and discourses. In this sense, we must note that discourses of fear often have a certain history proper to them; within any nationalist discourse of homeland defense, for instance, there will be a certain catalogue of past and present threats, conflicts that have occurred, methods of achieving security, and so on. In Foucault’s method, history as a linear timeframe is replaced by the “historical a priori,” or the “condition of reality for statements.”\textsuperscript{115} He examines groups of statements over time not in relation to historical progressions or origins of discourse, but as an archive of unique elements all governed and brought together by “the law of what can be said.” The archive is “the general system for the formation and transformation of statements,” or the multiplicity of conditions that may actualize into statements and

\textsuperscript{114} Lefebvre, *Fear*, 72–4.

\textsuperscript{115} On the historical *a priori* and the archive: Foucault, *Archaeology*, 127–9.
objects.

Unities of fear such as the superpredator or brigand, while at times treated like singular objects of discourse, are also expressions of particular conditions within broader discourses of threat. Furthermore, they themselves constitute their own positivities, with their own sets of possible articulations. The result is that articulations of these fear objects may intermingle with previous historical fear objects that fall within the archive. From this perspective, if the superpredator was continuously understood and portrayed as an “inner-city” Black criminal, it is perhaps because the its possibilities of expression fell under similar rules the govern the discourse of threatening Black men. Both threats were described similarly by media authorities, and seemed to pose similar dangers to those who feared them; superpredator fears might then have merged with those of Black men, as similar and overlapping actualizations of potential threats relating to street crime and gun violence. Fear in response to a particular object can then become magnified if it is understood as part of a trend or history of similar threats.

Similarly, in 1789 the threat of brigands became at times fused with historical threatening identities. On May 12, the coastal town of Montpellier erupted in panic “in view of the disturbing news that a number of brigands had landed near Cette in two boats, apparently with the express intention of setting fire to the port.” Georges Lefebvre concludes that this rumor must have been related to a peasant uprising in a nearby town, but explains its content through the particularities of local history: “If it seemed quite natural for the brigands to arrive

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116 Glassner devotes an entire chapter in *Fear* (109-27) to fears of black men accused of killing “innocent bystanders” without warning, and other crimes identical to the those that were pinned on violent youth.

117 Account from the bookseller Sébastien Hardy, cited by Lefebvre, *Fear*, 50.
by sea, this is probably because the people of Languedoc remembered very well those not too distant times when Barbary pirates roamed the Mediterranean.”

Sara Ahmed, who has written extensively on racism, hate, and fear, concludes that discursive signifiers of fear can be effectively reused and repeated because “they are effects of histories that have stayed open.” These effects articulate through affect: through their use and reuse, such signifiers recall previous histories, racism, and fears from the past, that are able to “stick to the present.” Foucault might argue that what remains open is not necessarily the permanence of historical conditions, but rather the stability and openness of discursive rules of formation. Cultural and personal memories are able to situate themselves within present possibilities of discourse, re-evoking past enunciations, and imbuing positivities with rearticulated history. While these histories remain firmly anchored to the past, the effect is that of transporting them back into the present, as if through a wormhole. The shock value of the reemergence of Barbary pirates, just as in the use of the word Negro, is the appearance of history remaining constant.

In Lefebvre’s words, “fear, that terrible specter … awakened memories best forgotten.” The probing faculties of fear and uncertainty have a tendency to scour the depths of history, re-actualizing past thoughts and experiences that appear to make sense of the present. The discreet connections of discursive rules of formation, which nullify the erasures of history, make possible an archive of old wounds, always present and always accessible, whenever a new wound or fear is opened. This

118 Ibid. 50.
121 Lefebvre, Fear, 23.
mechanism may contribute to what is often seen as historical scapegoating—the reoccurring tendency for minority and historically oppressed groups to be blamed for public misfortune. Guilt in then is not assigned through hatred so much as epistemic confirmation that the hated group is implicated; discursive perceptions of groups as guilty for previous crimes may easily overlap with the given conditions for understanding the current culprit. In this way, history has a way of appearing to repeat itself, in that group perceptions are perpetually implicated within a particular discourse of crime or threat, but loosely enough so that these perceptions will apply to newly emerging episodes of fear.

**Categories of the Fearsome**

The most significant emergent episode of fear in recent history began on September 11, 2001, with the devastating attacks by the terrorist group al-Qaeda on New York and Washington. After the horrifying events of that morning, millions of Americans and people around the globe were left fearing in anticipation of the next terrorist act. Perhaps by definition, the overwhelming atmosphere in America after 9/11 was one of profound uncertainty: al-Qaeda were a previously unheard-of group for the majority of the American public, and their tactics were characteristically invisible and unpredictable. Inevitably, in the confusing wake of the attacks, fear signifiers sprang up. *Al-Qaeda* was no longer simply the name for an international terrorist group; it accrued an emotional charge and a host of significances and associations, including other signifiers such as *terrorism* and *Islam*, and for many, images of the burning Twin Towers.

Sara Ahmed has written that groups of fear signifiers such as these often
appear to be related, and are grouped into chains of association. She provides an example derived from post-9/11 discourses of terrorism: “terrorist, fundamentalism, Islam, Arab, repressive, primitive.” Ahmed’s conception of fear focuses on its locomotive capacities; instead of remaining internal to the mind of the individual, or as frightening potential residing in an object, fear is mobile: “Emotions do not positively inhabit any-body or any-thing,” she writes, “meaning that ‘the subject’ is simply one nodal points in the [affective] economy, rather than its origin and destination.” Ahmed depicts fear as “sliding” between signs, or temporarily “sticking” to them. Because fear cannot reside in a body, it merely sticks to signifiers on the surface of bodies, and jumps between them, feeding from sign to sign. As a result, fear tends to slide along “chains of metonymic substitution,” or links of related signifiers. These associations are not merely drawn by individuals, but are linked through their expressions and articulations through discourse and in various types of media. Importantly, she emphasizes that their repeated juxtaposition reinforces their relatedness: “Indeed the slide of metonymy can function as an implicit argument about the causal relations between terms … within the making of truths and worlds, but in such a way that it does not require an explicit statement.” Ahmed calls the unified group created by these relations “a distinct category of the fearsome”—a commonly recognized classification within a contemporary episteme of threat.

But where do these links come from? Or rather, why these signifiers? Ahmed

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122 All quotations in this paragraph from Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 121-132.
123 For example, a Google News Archive search of “Islam AND repressive” for September 2001 turned up over 130 results for print media, the vast majority of which used the terms in the context of the “repressive regimes” such as the Taliban that were also predominantly Muslim. At http://news.google.com.
writes that these links consist of “stereotypes already in place,” of past histories of association. However, just as unities of fear may appear to adopt the identities of previously threatening objects, individual signifiers may also become associated with each other if their expressions emerge from within a particular system of formation. Certain previously unassociated signifiers may fall within a discourse of national security, becoming linked through their re-enunciations within those terms. Movement throughout the chain is then lubricated by the ability of fear to seek out and take hold of possible real threats, creating solid links from sometimes-tenuous associations. Eventually, as Ahmed proposes, these relations become reified within discourse. The power of discursive plasticity is therefore evidenced by the ability of disparate terms to appear causally related, creating “truths and worlds” on the level of meaning, simply by shifting the frame of discourse. Knowledge of threat is thus constituted not even through intentional media manipulations or exaggerations, but as with the superpredator, through a variety of discursive enunciations.

Within any given discourse of fear, there is often more than a single signifier associated with a threat. Turning again to 1789, Clay Ramsay has shown how words such as vagabond, beggar, and bands were often used interchangeably with or in relation to brigand. Interestingly, these lesser-used terms all connoted slightly different meanings from one another, but when combined seem to collectively make up the amorphous enigma that is the brigand.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest that such a central signifier may in fact directly symbolize a host of related terms. In A Thousand Plateaus they describe a “signifying regime of signs,” or what amounts to the totality of formalized

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linguistic discourse, as composed of particular “circles of signification.” Within each circle, and between them, there is a simple governing rule: “every sign refers to another sign, and only to another sign, ad infinitum.” The multitude of signs in each circle all in turn refer to a “supreme signifier.” For Deleuze and Guattari, such a Signifier is represented by the sum total of significance, and therefore “is a pure abstraction no less than a pure principle; in other words, it is nothing.”

This notion can be taken as a metaphor for the relationship between central signifiers of fear, and their infinite significances. With the utterance of any name that signifies fear or dread, the effect is quite often awe, or shock. Jehovah has historically been one such name—the signifier of all power and all creation, which cannot properly be described, but which relates to an infinity of other signifiers. Was the description of the “shock value” of the superpredator not similarly due to the unthinkable multitude of its horrors? The totality of implications of any fear object cannot, by definition, be known. Nevertheless, from such ambiguity of significance, other signifiers are given form as solid entities to be understood, or avoided.

After 9/11, the concepts of terrorism or terrorist attack could not help but strike dread of infinite destruction into the hearts of the fearful. Not only might domestic terrorists arise anywhere, at any time, but their potential for harm was unknowable—an attack could be a local bus bombing, or nuclear detonation. The logical step taken by the nation’s governing authorities was a strategy of preemption. Such a strategy necessarily operates in the realm of the virtual, what

125 All of the following quotations Deleuze and Guattari can be found in: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 111-117.
Ulrich Beck would call the “colonization of the future.” As such, all possible future manifestations of threat must be taken into account; as George W. Bush declared to recruits at West Point military academy in 2002, “if we wait for threats to materialize, we will have waited too long.” Terrorism, in its unpredictability and possible permutations, must be dissected, isolated, and taken out.

The result is officially sanctioned expansion of the epistemology of threat, and the categorical reification of signifiers. In January 2009 newly released documents detailed the extent to which the Maryland State Police had monitored the activities of local activist groups, and officially categorized them under the label “terrorism.” According to the Washington Post, the groups were “devoted to such wide-ranging causes as promoting human rights and establishing bike lanes.” The organization People for the Ethical Treatment was deemed “a ‘security threat’ because of concerns that members would disrupt the circus.” Additionally, “the DC Anti-War Network, which opposes the Iraq war, was designated a white supremacist group, without explanation.”

The names of these groups became themselves signifiers of threat, entered into a database along with their categorical descriptions, which included other historical signifiers of threat such as white supremacist. It is certainly probable, as Ahmed would suggest, that past histories of stereotyping certain groups as radical or threatening may have placed them within the realm of “terrorism.” However it’s equally likely that mere perceptions of these groups as “activist” fall neatly into the

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discursive field of terrorism, in which “disrupting the circus” is literally homologous with “terrorist act”— coming from the same discursive origins.

The pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty in the wake of 9/11 created a vacuum of open suspicion that needed to be filled. “Some observers say Sept. 11 opened the door,” for the extensive Maryland police surveillance, the Washington Post reported. “No one was thinking this was al-Qaeda … But 9/11 created an atmosphere where cutting corners was easier.” The events of September 11 marked a distinct transformation in the discourse of national threat. After the attacks, issues of national security became framed for the first time, both within the news media and in policy rhetoric, largely in terms of “terrorism,” with its particularized lexicon of threat signifiers— “dirty bombs,” “loose nukes,” and “WMD’s.” The emergence of this new set of terms does not necessarily represent a large-scale transformation of the entire rules of formation for the discourse; the dominance of terrorism discourse did not nullify other ways of speaking and conceiving of national security; rather it was the eruption of an additional positivity, a re-centering around the specter of terrorism, aided in its sticking power by fear.

The resulting shift within discourses of national threat was reflected materially in the creation of new systems of data entry by the Maryland State Police: “the database did not include categories that fit the nature of the protest-group investigations. So police created ‘terrorism’ categories to track the activists.” Associations are therefore called into being, through the necessity of adapting to a new discursive framework. Nodal points along the chain with previously tenuous relations were suddenly given causal reason for their fusion, with terrorism assuming

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the role of supreme signifier as the categorical figurehead.

**Deception, and the Limitless Frontier**

The stunning ability of signifying chains to imbue the objects of the world with new significances sheds light on Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion that the world of fear is “magical.” Sartre, to repeat, writes that in fear, “we magically ‘will’ certain qualities upon real objects: but those qualities are false.” From Sartre’s phenomenological standpoint, when we are overtaken by uncertainty, to the point of imbuing objects with terrifying significance, the world is a different place. Transformations in fear discourse—leading to the emergence of new fear signifiers or concepts—shifts the field of enunciation so that previously unmarked signifiers now fall under the rubric of threat. Signifying chains of fear then make up the fiber of Sartre’s magical worlds. Terror of the unknown not only solidifies new associations of guilt and suspicion; it creates endless networks of fear signs, and the ghostly traces of those threats yet to materialize.

Deleuze and Guattari describe such chains as not merely magical, but fundamentally deceptive. Signifiers grouped together into chains begin to lose individual meaning—“the limitless of significance replaces the sign.” For Deleuze and Guattari, all signs are essentially deterritorialized, existing without concrete meaning, in suspended relativity. They achieve signification through the authority of a supreme signifier in the center of the circular chain. Regimes of signs are composed of a multiplicity of circles, which are in turn composed of an infinite number of signs that may overlap, or jump between circles.

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Let us suppose that current terrorism discourse constitutes such a circle. The meaning of such a chain of signifiers—fundamentalism, Islam, PETA, loose nukes, bus bombing—is entirely dependent on the overarching idea of terrorism, forcibly linked together through the “despotism” of the supreme signifier. Together they form an assemblage of fear, of possible threats, and disastrous consequences. Collective fear is then mutual participation in an extended discourse of knowable and unknowable threatening futures. Endless strings of possible threats and targets form continuously extending networks, creating worlds of virtual disaster, everywhere. After 9/11, for example, the American landscape and citizenry became imbued with fearful significance: as of June 2006 there were 77,069 officially declared terrorist targets in the U.S., of which included not only bridges and offices but flea markets and ice cream stores as well.\textsuperscript{131} While some argue that such threat categorization is due to state legislatures pining for federal funding, it is the dual power of uncertainty, and of the signifying regime to “constantly assure the expansion of circles,” that the identification of new potential threats is even possible.\textsuperscript{132}

Fear is often referred to as a contagion, and is in fact contagious bidirectionally. In one direction, fearful individuals sound the alarm of external threat to others, and knowledge of fear objects spreads throughout a population. In the opposite direction, the stickiness of fear is forced through and across signifying chains, reterritorializing sign after sign. The world of signs becomes shot through with terrifying signification, just as populations increasingly participate in fearful discourse.

\textsuperscript{131} Svendsen, \textit{Fear}, 112.

\textsuperscript{132} Quote from Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{Plateaus}, 114. On the politics of targeting, see Svendsen, \textit{ibid.}
The signifying chain is ordered and limited by what Deleuze and Guattari call the “interpretive priest,” who determines, in Foucault’s terminology, the rules of formation for the structuring of the chain. Signs are ordered along particular lines, and some signifiers are necessarily excluded. We have explored how even within such rules, objects of fear are quite mutable. What is truly terrifying about the mechanics of fear discourse within uncertainty is the simultaneous strengthening and weakening of the priest’s abilities to structure and delineate. When, in Lefebvre’s words, uncertainty is so profound that “a sound, a light, a shadow is enough to start an alarm,” the most disparate signs can come under the power of the fear signifier.\(^{133}\)

Yet at the same time, the entire regime begins to lose its significance all together; the system can fall into entropy, becoming abstracted. When fear has stretched sinuous chains to their maximum point of elasticity, signs lose their relation to the central signifier, coming to be symbols for fear and fear alone. Deleuze and Guattari write that the signifying chain has a *face*, an icon that is the substantive expression of the supreme signifier, which gives meaning to the chain. “When the face has been effaced” they write, “we can be sure we have entered into another regime, other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible.”\(^{134}\) The danger of officially or unofficially implanting such wide networks of fear associations is that when the face of threat becomes obscured, less apparent, or forgotten, signs may

\(^{133}\) Lefebvre, *Fear*, 50.

\(^{134}\) For Erving Goffman, one’s *face* during a social encounter reflects the positive social value attached to the individual in reference to an assumed *line*, or the pattern of meaningful behaviors she is expected to follow. If one *loses* *face*, a disconnect occurs between one’s performed and expected behaviors, so that the overall meaning of the encounter is downgraded; all that is visible is the strange performance of meaningless signs. In a regime of fear signs, the network of frightening objects must maintain face if they are to retain meaning and value. Erving Goffman, “On Face-Work,” *Social Theory*, 3rd ed., ed. Charles Lemert (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 332-6.
lose their concrete relation to a particular discourse of threat, but without losing their fearful properties.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes points to the production of symbols as the incorporation and subtle erasure of previous signification. Myth for Barthes is a “second-order semiological system” that is “constructed from a semiological chain that existed before it.”\(^{135}\) Despite the linguistic structures of signifier/signified that lie beneath its surface, myth transmits a singular message. Over time, the nodal points along a signifying fear chain can achieve mythical status; they become abstracted from the socio-political context of collective fear, and instead achieve a subtle affective resonance of pure feeling-tone.

Ahmed addresses this possibility in her understanding of emotion as directly related to past bodily experiences. She points out that the process of understanding emotions such as fear involves a processing and recording of sensation, of how exactly we feel in relation to certain experiences. “Not only do we read such feelings,” she writes, “but how the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of recognition (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know*.”\(^{136}\) Such a recalling of bodily memories can be felt before they are understood, bypassing consciousness. Emotion is “affected by objects of perception that gather as one’s past bodily experience” so that pure, yet inexplicable feeling may result from re-experiencing objects that were previously signified as threatening.

The question then arises of what eventually happens to objects that are

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produced as threatening, which are suddenly thrust into strict discursive categories. If discourse is a collective endeavor, with possibilities for expanding knowledge reification, the potential exists for bodies and objects that become signified as fearful to remain that way, years after people have forgotten the initial origin of threat. Italo Calvino tells the story of a city whose memories have seeped into the cityscape as if it were a sponge, memories which are felt and understood by the passing traveler. The city, he writes, “does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand.”

137 There is, in this way, always the danger of widespread discourses of collective fear etching lasting effects on objects and surfaces.

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Uncertainty does not only seek out and reify those linguistic signifiers of fear related through discourse; visual signifiers and visual markings pertaining to linguistic forms may also be appropriated, becoming objects of fear in themselves. This placement of discursive markings within the physical realm can be termed materialization—what Judith Butler defines as the “the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface.”

138 If collective fear is primarily mediated through the malleability of discourse, every modulation and incorporation into the realm of threat may have distinct material effects.

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3 Suspicious Materializations: 
Body Maps, Turbans, and Beggars

In January 2009, nine Muslim passengers on a U.S. airline flight were ordered off the airplane before it had even left the gate, after two teenagers sitting nearby reported that they had overheard “suspicious” remarks. The nine passengers, including three young children and two married couples, appeared traditionally Muslim, the women wearing hijab headscarves and the men in beards. The exchange that was overheard between one woman and her husband concerned the safety of their seating location, near the engines, in the case of an accident. As the husband later told the press, “The conversation we were having was the conversation anyone would have.” A spokeswoman for the Transportation Safety Administration, however, called the comments “inappropriate.” The head executive of the airline asserted, “At the end of the day, people got on and made comments they shouldn't have made on the airplane, and other people heard them … It just so happened these people were of Muslim faith and appearance.”

In some respects, this incident may appear to be a simple case of “paranoia” and “misconstruing” of overheard remarks in a nation still wary of another airplane hijacking. The underlying subtext of the incident, however, was that the overheard remarks were considered suspicious mainly because they were uttered by individuals deemed to be suspicious in appearance. Indeed, as the Islamic advocacy group CAIR has averred, the incident exemplifies the stereotyping of Muslims, and those who

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Since the horrific events of that day, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in violent crimes directed towards minorities, particularly Sikh men, perceived to be ethnically related to those behind the attacks. Jasbir Puar provides a survey of the scope of the violence, which has included,

Verbal harassment (being called “bin Laden,” “son of bin Laden”… ), especially on the phone or while driving; tailgating; hate mail; defecating and urinating on Sikh gurdwaras, Islamic mosques and Hindu temples, leading in some cases to arson; blocking the entrance of a Sikh temple in Sacramento … throwing bricks, gasoline bombs, garbage, and other projectiles into the homes of Sikhs and Arabs … death threats and bomb threats; fatal shootings of taxi drivers, the majority of whom have been turbaned Sikhs … and attacks with baseball bats, paintball guns, lit cigarettes, and pigs’ blood.\footnote{Jasbir Puar, \textit{Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 179.}

A remarkable amount of this violence has been directed not simply at wearers of various types of turbans, but at the turban itself. For many, the turban has assumed a monolithic symbolism in its association with the events of 9/11 and the perceived repressive cultures and ideologies that are seen to generate such acts of terror. Other markings of terrorist corporeality such as the burqa or hijab have attracted similar violence and fear since the attacks, and continue to do so.
Judith Butler has suggested that when visual signifiers are pre-signified as threatening, the act of “seeing” becomes more than direct perception; it is “the racial production of the visible, the workings on racial constraints of what it means to ‘see.’” In this way, “when the visual is fully schematized by racism,” the presence of racial markers will always identify a body as violent; seeing only serves to reproduce predetermined threat.142 Through the power of the ocular, traditionally dressed Muslims may be “seen” as always already threatening; and thus any number of comments made are not merely suspicious, but validating of impending danger.

If episodes of stereotyping rose in frequency after 9/11, how exactly are such perceptions put into place? What is the process through which these passive bodies are now figured within a particular discourse of threat as active aggressors?

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Linguistic fear signifiers often have material reflections; *turban* for instance, may be spoken of in relation to terrorism, just as the sight of its wrappings and cloth may be seen as associated with al-Qaeda. In his analysis of the fashion industry, Roland Barthes demonstrated the direct links that exist between linguistic descriptions of a visual object, its material existence, and its representation as an image. The relationships between these structures are “intelligible,” so that members of a culture may easily shift between them and still construct meaning. The result is a “collective image system,” embedded within a particular discourse.143

As previously suggested, particular discourses of threat tend to be associated with specific visual signifiers, which can manifest themselves on the bodies of individuals. Yet it is not always clear how some physical attributes come to be feared

\[142\] As cited by Puar, *Terrorist*, 183.

in specific contexts. How might collective image systems of fear be created and maintained? Linguistic discourse and processes of materialization interface through nonlinear, mutually interactive systems: discourse can determine bodily signification, while visual signifiers may be appropriated into the ordered realm of signs. Modulations of discursive unities will inevitably involve possible fluctuations in their materializations, which may in turn become reified within an episteme of fear signs.

**Mapping the Signs of Threat**

There are three ways in which visible markers come to be brought into collective discourses of threat. The first is through explicit juxtaposition, when the formulation of a discourse occurs initially along lines of visual signification. In her studies of ethnic violence in the 1970's between the Tutsi and Hutu populations of Burundi, Liisa Malkki describes how early efforts made by Belgian colonial authorities to differentiate between the two populations eventually solidified associations between bodily signifiers and particular ethnicities. Original colonial descriptions, which marked Tutsis as taller and more beautiful, and Hutus as plainer and stockier, were widely unreflective of the complexities of actual physical and ethnic difference; yet they eventually became stable social categories. In the mythico-history of the Hutu people, these gross totalizations developed into detailed “body maps,” in which “nose shape, color of the tongue and gums, size of pupils, hair texture … lines of the palm of the hand were all markers of difference.”¹⁴⁴ This bodily semiotic system was maintained and passed down by Hutus as an important

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method of not only identifying ethnicity, but of also demarcating which people were considered moral and righteous. The incorporation of these signifiers within discourses of identity and culture was therefore a causal process of introduction and then reification within collective knowledge.

Signifying body maps were at times violently imposed on the bodies they were meant to describe. During the genocidal violence by Tutsis towards Hutus of the early 1970’s, these systems of took the form of “necrographic maps” (maps, in effect, of the dead) with specific bodily markers serving as vague, but decisive, signifiers of allegiance, and thus threat. Because identification was bound to remain uncertain, if not entirely unknown, markers of difference became specific sites of violence. Malkki suggests that, “through violence, bodies of individual persons became metamorphosed into specimens of the ethnic category for which they are supposed to stand.” In this case, the discrepancy that exists between the totalizing properties of discursive entities, and the complex realities they correspond to is made brutally visible in such frustrated attempts to produce bodies that conform to perceived categories. Materialization occurs not simply through the ocular “seeing” of marked bodies in terms of threat discourse, but by forcibly producing them after the fact of the encounter.

Malkki’s example is demonstrative of the power of long-standing cultural discourses of difference and threat to solidify and retain collective understandings of specific visual signification. The semiotic body map, in this case, is relatively fixed in

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145 For Ferdinand de Saussure, language constitutes one type of “semiological” (or semiotic) system, composed of meaningful signs. Other types of semiotic systems, including visual systems, are structured similarly: “…linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.” Ferdinand de Saussure, “Arbitrary Social Values and the Linguistic Sign,” *Social Theory*, 3rd ed., ed. Charles Lemert (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 151.

146 Ibid. 88.
the meanings and archive of its signs. Yet its direct infusion into discourses of threat does not necessarily preclude modulation or supplementation; while John DiIulio, for example, formulated visual schema in conjunction with the concept of the superpredator (“young,” and “male”), these visual properties were soon altered and expanded on.

Indirect Association

The turban provides an interesting case study for the production of signification, in that its accumulating associations with Islamic fundamentalist terrorism are abundant and in continuous production. It is quite clear that since 9/11, the turban has been incorporated into discourses of national threat and security. One particularly flagrant example can be found in the comments of U.S. Representative John Cooksey, shortly after the attacks: “If I see someone come in and he’s got a diaper on his head and a fan belt around that diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over and checked.”\textsuperscript{147} It should be noted that nothing inherent to the discourse of terrorism necessitates associations with turbans; none of the actual 9/11 hijackers were wearing turbans during the attacks, or in their media portrayals.\textsuperscript{148} Defending his remarks, Cooksey said he was “referring to Osama bin Laden”— clearly articulating a quite common perception: that those who wear turbans are, in fact, signifying replicates of the leader of al-Qaeda. Cooksey’s comments reveal the startling ability of a single signifier—with its rich and varied styles, religious associations, and histories—to have situated itself as a powerful


threat indicator within the discourse of national security. Is it possible that turbaned depictions of the alleged terrorist mastermind could have immediately, but subtly, implanted the signifier as a monolithic symbol within national consciousness?

This example of the turban as accruing the marks of terrorist identity must be understood in its full context of post-millennial media representations and circulations. In her work “Communication Beyond Meaning,” Tiziana Terranova depicts modern media environments as the informational milieu, or “the noisy field of communication, the proliferating clutter of information that … does not address a static mass subdued but a probabilistic, discontinuous and mutable cultural milieu.” To reiterate Marshall McLuhan’s notion of media as environments, the modern informational milieu is by definition an environment that directly interfaces with the population at all possible junctures, cultural shifts becoming inextricably linked to informational flows. This environment consists of multiplicities of crosscurrents of communication, resulting from an overabundance of media forms and units. As such, exposure or participation within such a milieu is not as simple as receiving or rejecting a given message from a sender; its dynamics are nonlinear, involving “the specific interplay of tensions and instabilities,” within the very act of communication. All communication should therefore be assessed “on the basis of the chain of events by which it is set in motion, and which it sets in motion.” Terranova concentrates on how the construction of meaning can be understood through the physical dimensions of compression, signal, and noise; cultural expression cannot be predicted based on a binary relationship of input and output, but instead results from interactive processes of transmission, induction, appropriation, and modulation.

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149 The Following three quotations are from: Tiziana Terranova, “Communication Beyond Meaning: On the Cultural Politics of Information,” Social Text 22.3 (Fall 2004), 66.
of messages.

From Terranova’s perspective, it is easy to see how depictions of a turbaned Osama bin Laden would be (and have been) juxtaposed with images of the burning Twin Towers, solidifying associations of the turban with terrorism within public discourse. Besides the turban, it’s likely that other markers that have “triggered” hate crimes against Muslims were imbued with discursive significance through these mechanisms—such as prayer rituals or lesser-known head coverings like the kufi. These associations may be, in turn, fed back into the milieu to be further processed, interpreted, and solidified.

The Turban as Symbolic Unity

Informational dynamics also suggest one route through which the turban has achieved its distinctly monolithic status. Terranova describes how agglomerations of data have the quality of concealing into broad unities underlying fields of discontinuity and nuance. Information as a “macrostate or molar (opposite of molecular) formation that can be represented by a number or a description … does not have a linear or deterministic relation to the multiplicity of the microscopic states that define it.” In other words, just as the simplest of digitized images conceals the multitude of pixels that comprise it, any message or representation conveyed in the milieu necessarily obscures whatever intricacies or exceptions may be intimately related to the “big picture.” Mediated identities and representations

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150 CAIR’s 2008 hate crime report provides a list of “triggers” believed to have contributed to the attacks, which include the kufi, niqab (female head covering), halal food, Qur’an or other Islamic literature, beards, participation in the hajj, and a Muslim-sounding name, among others.
151 Terranova, “Communication,” 64.
will therefore conceal their complexities, conveying “a very coarse and loose type of information—not so much untrue as simplistically informed.”

The turban represents a symbolic unity that both “reveals and hides the terrorist”—revealing in its role as the singular totality of terrorist significance, while hiding the actual multiplicities of meaning it can be associated with (even the not-so-miniscule differences between Muslim/Sikh, turban/dastar/kaffiyeh). Issues of “mistaken identity” and stereotyping are often figured in terms of “fungibility” or a displacing of one identity or entity for another. Information theory, coupled with the preemptive strategies of uncertainty, nullifies the premise of mistaken identity. Rather than the difference-marking acts of displacement or ignorance, fearful stereotyping participates in pervasive structures of blanket discursive entities that subsume categories. The turban signifies the terrorist, and only the terrorist; within modern discourses of fear, there are no mistakes to make, only broad indicators that include any and all potential threats. From this perspective, the ocular faculties of “seeing” are not schematized by racism so much as the impossibility of full threat knowledge, and the quite literal veiling power of symbols. This is not to say that racial hatred does not exist, but that it is augmented and sustained by the material limitations of information.

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These dynamics of the informational milieu are not distinct to the late modern era; as Terranova explains, they are in fact mere extensions of the way communication has always functioned. Information transmission necessarily involves interference,

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152 Ibid, 66.
153 Puar, Terrorist, 174.
distortion, and the turbulent interplay of other currents. Indeed, the totalizing ability of digital information flow is analogous, and is in fact a manifestation, of quotidian instances of data compression necessary to make “the sheer magnitude and uncertainty of the world manageable.” The broad generalizations institutionalized by Belgian authorities in Burundi, for instance, were simply methods of packaging complex information for easy understanding, and cultural reception.

Likewise, Lefebvre describes several incidents during the Great Fear of 1789 in which particular visual descriptions of brigands were able to circulate and maintain credence. In one case, after four men dressed as Catholic monks passed through a town and apparently threatened violence towards several townspeople, rumors spread for weeks in the area about brigands who looked like “beggars.” This rumor eventually started a full-scale panic when one man “upset by what he heard about beggars, thought he saw them.” Any mere semblance of mendicancy becomes a sure sign of threat. The informational milieu in this 18th-century environment consisted primarily of communication via word-of-mouth, but the incident exemplifies the ability for visual signifiers to becoming indirectly absorbed into fear discourse.

**Haptic Knowledge**

Indirect incorporation represents the second of three methods by which signifiers become functional unities of discourse. Yet Puar identifies another route through which the turban in particular may have come to be commonly feared. In *Terrorist*

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Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, Puar asserts that a feared object need not be imbued with fearful qualities in the signifying realm of epistemology. Arguing that a feared body can be felt without being known, she proposes a departure from representational knowledge to one of tactile economies, or “haptic” knowing. For Deleuze and Guattari, haptic is preferred over tactile because it “invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function [of touch].”

Puar focuses on the materiality of the turban, on its careful daily construction, and the sweat, oils, and hair it comes into contact with, as an embodiment of cultural, tactile, knowledge. As separate from “the structuring logic of vision … tactile knowledges install normativizing traces of danger, fear, and melancholia into the bodies of racialized terrorist look-alikes.” According to Puar, tactile channels subvert the reception and cognition of visual signifiers by providing an ontological origin for the production of fear. She asserts that these “traces of danger, fear, and melancholia” do not belong to the epistemic realm and instead exist within the fear object as a direct result of daily cultural practices. Such traces are then received affectively, impressing the body with heightened agitation. From this perspective, what makes a body terrifying is as much the strange experience of its tactility as its discursive significance as dangerous.

This analysis, however, does not account for the jump made between tactile sensing and epistemological knowing, which together comprise one’s fully conscious, socially validated, experience of danger. Puar does not quite explain how tactile experiences can reflect fear of a specifically terrorist body, with all its

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158 Puar, Terrorist, 194
associated socio-political implications. For this to happen, epistemology must come into play, through one of two ordered process. In the first, the experience with the strange body resonates affectively, followed by the conscious or semi-conscious recognition of pre-registered signs of danger—i.e. the sight of the turban is disturbing; it is disturbing because it marks the terrorist.

Through the second route, however, signs previously unmarked as associated with terrorism may suddenly accrue new discursive significance. The affective experience of danger—abstract, generalized threat—demands to be registered and known as contextualized feeling. If no signs of known threat are present, the experience of the stranger may slide into a known discourse of threat. The process may operate through sliding between signifiers: kufi, Islam, terrorist. The resulting effect is quite powerful: when the known schema of the ocular fail to properly decipher an experience, cultural narrative takes over. Just as the stultifying experience of Orson Welles’ Martian broadcast could ascribe interpretations to political narratives of a Japanese attack, current discourses of threat retain a captivating hold over interpretations of personal experiences.

Haptic sensations then mark the third way in which bodily signifiers become terrifying: instead of any direct or indirect epistemic juxtaposition with a principle fear signifier, haptic resonance becomes lodged within socio-linguistic understandings. What Sara Ahmed refers to as bodily experience, or the affective experience of a frightening object, can then be accessed and remembered by consciousness. If these experiences are understood as part of a wider discourse of threat, such knowledge can become solidified not only within the individual, but within the signifying episteme through conversations, rumors, and general
circulations of discourse.

The three routes that I have indicated as ascribing meaning to visual signifiers are often actually (though not by necessity) thoroughly interrelated. They comprise a multi-tiered, interactive system of information circulation in which pre-conscious affect and discursive signification take part in the formation of fear signifiers, from the level of the individual body to that of the population. Official designations may be intersected by media representations and popular rumor, giving form and validity to affective suspicion, which in turn reinforces understandings of threat. Circulations and reproductions of visual signifiers are all then subject to the discursive mutations and knowledge expansions elaborated upon previously.

The affective openness of the body, in constant articulation with the informational milieu, displaces the power of media and governing elites to assert control over how threats are understood and perceived by the population. If signs become culturally reified through repetition and reuse, any proliferation of meaning relies to a large degree on probability, as distinct from intention. While dominant modes of message transmission (Presidential announcements, headline news reports) may increase circulation, subtle juxtaposition and Internet viral networking have become veritable routes for knowledge formation.

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In 2008, a revealing study conducted at the University of New South Wales, Australia, further illustrated the power and complexity of threat signification with respect to the turban, in particular. Researchers designed a computer shooting game in which participants were required to shoot only at armed targets onscreen, some of which wore distinctly Muslim-looking headgear, males in turbans and women in
hijabs. As predicted, participants were significantly more likely to shoot at those wearing either form of headgear over the other bareheaded targets, even if the Muslim look-alikes weren’t carrying a weapon. According to the study’s author, Christian Unkelbach, ”Just putting on this piece of clothing changes people's behavior,” even if these people, he adds, are “liberal and tolerant Australian undergraduates.”159 Most of the participants claimed to not have realized their shooting bias, and many were disturbed that they had so unconsciously acted that way. The study attributes this behavior, dubbed the Turban Effect, to “underlying” and “acquired negative stereotypes.” Unkelbach also points to “one-sided,” stereotypical media portrayals as the purveyors of these biases.

Theories of informational dynamics and affect, however, suggest the process is more complicated than mere dissemination of pre-structured stereotypes. In part, the respondents may be reacting in fear to haptic sensations of danger and melancholia in the tactile appearance of the turban; equally likely is the role of pre-conscious triggering of already registered signification, which may have originated though various media juxtapositions, or personal experiences with the turban as threatening. The notion that media portrayals of turbaned terrorists directly lead to pre-conscious registering of the turban as threatening on a mass scale simplifies the process of how bodies come to be feared, and ignores the potential for associations to arise and then solidify through subtler channels. The Turban Effect underscores the significance of Puar’s notion of the turban as a “strange attractor.” In the dual

meaning that she most likely intends, the turban’s significance is formulated both by unpredictability and nonlinear flows, as well its property of affective strangeness that attracts violent, even fetishistic attention.\textsuperscript{160} The peculiar subtlety behind the brutal reactions of the study’s respondents indicates the insidious power of probabilistic bodily signification, of the ability for signifiers to assume discursive meaning, and to become lodged within pre-conscious potential.

These ever developing semiotic systems-in-becoming, subject to personal interpretations and modulations of discourse, permeate the lived world with realistic indicators of potential danger. They are veritable body maps of virtual threat, sticking to certain bodily signifiers and imbuing them with fear. Visual detection and haptic sensing drift over and through public spaces, transcending any social boundaries, including those of class, that do not correspond to the system’s order of signs. Members of the collective may then assume new lines of behavior based on their visual significations; those knowing that they embody the marks of threat may act cautiously to avoid suspicion, while others in relation to them might feel the right, or even the duty, to regard them suspiciously. In this way, probabilistic regimes of visual signs are not understood and obeyed through choice or opinion; they instead help form the fabric of the social.

**Encountering the Stranger**

Clues provided by visual signifiers of threat become crucially important during

\textsuperscript{160} Deleuze and Guattari explain the mathematical principle of the strange, or “chaotic” attractor as a set of intersecting trajectories whose paths are wrought with unpredictability: “strange attractors reveal [science’s] profound attraction to chaos.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; translated by Hugh and Janis Tomlinson) 206.
periods of social uncertainty. Determining which mysterious figures may or may not be harmful is essential for survival in any uncertain world, and requires an understanding of the visual semiotics of particular threat discourses. Coded markers may be as distinct as tattooed insignia, or as vague as behavioral traits such as nervousness. But what happens when visual signs are ambiguous, when a body is marked as both threatening and potentially harmless, such that determination is impossible?

If transformations in fear discourse alter the contours of how threats are known and discussed, changes must also occur in the forms of their materializations, and in how they are identified. Large-scale shifts can seem to suddenly reorient social relations within populations, redrawing the lines that define a fearing collective. Inevitably, some individuals will be cast into zones of ambiguity, relegated to the liminal social space of the feared.

In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Zygmunt Bauman draws an analogy between the production of such liminal zones and the appearance of hermeneutic problems in linguistics. To avoid uncertainty of message transmission, and for the sake of order and clarity, language attempts to prevent ambivalence by naming and classifying. The quest to firmly establish categories for all entities is, however, endless; the over- or under-determination of situations is inevitable, and the creation of narrower categories always results in further grey areas. Because ambivalence subverts any attempt to establish order and predictability, we experience it as “discomfort and a threat,” or “a feeling of indecision, undecidability, and thus loss of control.”

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Likewise, in its perpetual “quest for order,” the modern state draws distinctions between allies and enemies, ordinary citizens and evildoers, which are bound to create ambivalent areas of suspects and potential threats. Bauman turns to Simmel’s characterization of “the stranger,” to represent the individual who is neither friend nor enemy—or who is maybe both—but whose allegiance, either way, remains unknowable. The strangers’ ambivalence is terrifying because “they question oppositions as such… the plausibility of dichotomy it suggests and feasibility of separation it demands.”162

Simmel’s archetypal stranger is based on the figure of the historical European Jew, who by moving into a new socio-spatial circle would bring “qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.”163 For Bauman, then, the stranger’s ambivalent social position stems from her dual role as outsider and insider. She stands opposed to previously established sets of oppositions: indigenous/alien, nearness/distance, friend/enemy. She is, quite literally, the embodiment of social liminality.164

The visual turbulence created by interference between signs articulates directly with the body’s affective capacities. According to Massumi, the affective experience of an image is intensified when its meaning is unclear: “matter-of-factness dampens intensity.”165 The impossibility for linguistic explanation of a visual experience translates into suspense, or a generalized feeling of uncertainty. The encounter with the stranger can only leave one in suspense about who this

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162 Ibid. 58.
164 One definition of liminal: “occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a threshold,” from The Oxford English Dictionary. Available at http://oed.com.
person is, or what she might do.

From Bauman’s perspective, it is the modern state that produces and reproduces strangers through alterations in discourses of collective threat: "it is the friends who define the enemies ... who control the classification and assignment.” It is thus the friends who produce strangers—and strange bodies—merely by shifting the frame of discursive classificatory rules. Signifiers become appropriated and rearticulated as marks of threat, materializing on bodies and surfaces. Political theorist Ioannis Evrigenis calls this “the political economy of fear, in which the changing intensity of threats and the consequent fluidity of groups along the friend-enemy continuum bring about the realignment of individuals and groups.” By declaring the presence of a new threat, aided by the production and appropriation of visual markers within discourse, the state is able to define the lines of threatening classification, thereby producing bodies after the fashion of discourse. The frame of reference through which one understands the threatening world is thus highly determined by broader shifts within discourse; enabling the emergence of new sign systems, and leaving hijab-clad airplane passengers imbued with terrifying uncertainty.

1789 and the Fear of Wanderers

It is not always the sole work of government that draws allying delineations. During the Great Fear of 1789, the threat posed by brigands was articulated not simply by the government to the people, but through complex processes of rumor and official announcement. According to Lefebvre, the idea of brigands as a real

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threat to the French people arose first within the population, where it circulated and was soon articulated by various authorities including the king, reinforcing its status. The word of threat nonlinearly diffused through the population, branching out, picking up credibility as it fused with other rumors in some areas, while dying off in others.

But how were people to know who the brigands were, or what they looked like? Lefebvre notes that “for a long time” brigands had been identified with “the rag, tag and bobtail of society”; visual signs arose within threat discourse. Indeed, when brigands were supposedly spotted, they were often depicted as poor wanderers and beggars dressed in rags. It was along these lines that collective fear of brigands came to draw rough delineations through the population to demarcate threat. Both countryside and town alike were flooded with recently unemployed peasants looking for work or food; unknown to local communities, and with steadily increasing numbers, these strangers aroused general feelings of anxiety, intensifying levels of affect within the population. By the summer of 1789, with talk of brigands emanating from every community, the sight of wanderers in rags provoked extreme fear; sometimes giving rise to the alarms that became the Great Fear.

The overwhelming presence of vagabonds also gave rise to other fear signifiers such as beggars. In his analysis of the Soissonnais region during the Fear, Clay Ramsay suggests that despite numerous accounts of fears of “beggars,” it wasn’t actually the act of begging that triggered fear. Detailing the intricate systems

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of mendicancy and charity based around local parishes, Ramsay asserts that begging was a formally structured social institution. Beggars who were known as members of the community were willingly supported through charity; yet travelers who passed through towns requesting alms were decried. These latter “external poor” were considered “outsiders,” and were held in extremely low esteem by communities they came into contact with. Ramsay then suggests that “the criteria of appearance” used by the mounted police “to suspect a person,” of brigandage had less to do with evidence of begging, or their ragged appearance, and more with “signs of being a stranger to the territory—such as a variant accent, or even an expression of perplexity before a crossroads.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, under-determination, or the absence of definite features.

These signs are strikingly similar to Ahmed’s understanding of affective signification as a “seems like,” instead of “looks like.”¹⁷¹ This shift indicates that the experience of a feared body lies primarily in the realm of haptic resonance. The encounter with the suspected brigand eludes description, but still insists on being described. Reports of widespread fear of beggars indicate that the act of begging became itself a well-known discursive fear signifier alongside brigand through the previously described processes of haptic appropriation and reification.

The presence of such heavily valued signifiers could then elevate a person from the category of mere stranger, to that of suspicion. Suspicion is the conscious acknowledgment of the strange experience within the realm of threat; and is what led to intense anxiety at the sight of wanderers in rags.

The vast majority of unemployed who became the targets of fear did nothing to intentionally cast themselves as threats; they simply fell between the boundaries of signification, into the liminal cracks of society. Neither marked as truly threatening, nor embodying distinct traits of familiarity, these strangers remained the true unknowables produced by the circulations of majoritarian discourses of fear, leaving many to stopped, arrested, and interrogated.
4 Camps, Asylum-Seekers, and the Maintenance of Order

In September 2003, U.S. Army Capt. James J. Yee had suddenly become, in the eyes of the U.S. Government, unknowable. While working as a Muslim chaplain at the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Yee had aroused suspicion for encouraging prisoners and fellow Muslim staff members to participate in organized prayer sessions. Even as a West Point graduate and American citizen, his overt religious expression and open sympathy with detainees provoked anxiety among other guards, who placed him under strict surveillance. He was arrested upon taking leave from Cuba, and charged with espionage, mutiny, sedition, and aiding the enemy—all of which were eventually dropped. According to Yee, the reasons for his arrest were simple: “it was because I am a Muslim.” 172

Every collective discourse of threat, through its inevitable demarcations of exterior and interior, admits a rupture of ambivalence within which individuals find themselves cast as suspicious. Through their ambiguity, these unknowables challenge the sacred oppositions that define conflict: they “destroy the world.” 173 For any collective representation of threat to remain truly Durkheimian, in the sense of its “harmony with the nature of things,” unknowables “must be tabooed, disarmed, suppressed, exiled physically or mentally—or the world may perish.” 174

For this reason, James Yee was thrown into solitary confinement, where he was subject to interrogations and bodily searches; in his words: “mouth open, tongue

173 Bauman, Ambivalence, 55.
174 Latter quote from Bauman, ibid.
up, down, nothing inside. Right arm up, nothing in my armpit.”

When the risks are too great, when the known world is at stake, the preemptive strategies of uncertainty mandate that no chances be taken with potential threats. How does one nullify uncertainty, and take command of the future?

Suspicion, as the uncertainty of under- or over-determination, must be replaced by assumed guilt. Strangers are cast out to zones of exclusion—liminal areas that are both interior and exterior—where they are to be interrogated, probed, and explored in order to discover their true identities. Giorgio Agamben has identified the camp as the state’s ideal method for controlling uncertainty, as the paradigmatic zone of indistinction:

Whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical procedure no longer make any sense.

As a political space both outside the physical boundaries of the state but within the dominion of the sovereign, the camp represents a stable state of exception; a space in which normal juridical rule is suspended in favor of the ultimate right of the sovereign to declare the exception, and thus to re-establish the norm of the law. The figure of homo sacer, which can be traced back to ancient Roman law, is both criminal and “sacred life”—with the capacity to be legally killed, but not sacrificed, “outside both human and divine law.” The political reality of homo sacer is identical to that of the camp. Both exist in a zone of indistinction that defies all oppositions, and all rights to citizenship, property, and life (both human and divine). This is the true

175 Yee, “American.”
177 Agamben, Homo, 73.
space of the stranger, appointed by the sovereign and elevated to the level of *homo sacer*, utterly ambivalent in realms social, political, and divine. As the unknowable who threatens through his resistance to all categorization, he must be re-produced as known.

By declaring the state of exception, the sovereign “decides the fact that decides on its application.” To exercise complete authority over all life—*bare life*, stripped of rights and all qualification—is to demolish uncertainty and replace it with fact. Within the camp, the ambivalence of the stranger is finally knowable and quantifiable through the very fact of its re-production. By removing the stranger from the life-world of meaning into an empty zone of indistinction, his uncertainty is matched by the ambivalence of the camp, and his power is neutralized. The camp represents the ultimate colonization of the future; all possible futures are known by virtue of the sovereign’s right to declare *fact*.

Published in 1995, Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* eerily foreshadowed the social and political realities of the post-9/11 world, with the institution of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp as a primary holding facility for those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. Since October 2001, over seven hundred detainees have been held, and of these over four hundred have been released without ever being charged in a criminal court. For many of the prisoners deemed innocent, their incarceration amounted to the ascription of the fact of their guilt by military authorities. Suspicion leads to arrest, and the removal of rights to proper

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178 Ibid., 173.
jurisdiction. When the protections of the Geneva Conventions do not apply, there is no law to be questioned, and thus no questionable violation of any law.

In recent years, the legality of “enemy combatants” to be held at Guantanamo has been challenged by courts, domestic and international, sometimes successfully. Prisoners have begun to be granted some rights of civil authority; and the sole power of the sovereign to dictate the political norm has heavily come under fire. Yet even as current president Barack Obama has declared his intention to close the camp, he has admitted that to do so would be, “more difficult than I think a lot of people realize.” Not only are there still those unknowables out there whose potential violence must be contained, but there is also the potential for “releasing people who are intent on blowing us up,” even those who were previously only guilty of suspicion. The power of the sovereign to designate homo sacer may truly be the absolute determination of social fact. The one who is declared to be a social contradiction—designated as uncertain because he was presumed to be—cannot be removed from his now-proper zone of ambivalence without posing the threat that justified his original arrest. The sovereign “de facto produces the situation as a consequence of his decision on the exception.”

Those found to be carrying the marks of the enemy, in whatever capacity necessary to reach the threshold of suspicion, thus necessitate incarceration in order to preserve categorical order; ambivalence, and thus uncertainty and chaos, must be

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180 In one instance, Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib, arrested in 2001 in Pakistan and sent to Guantanamo, was assumed to be guilty of involvement in “the terrorist element at the time,” probably because he was traveling without proper visas. He was held until 2005 without being charged. “Profile: Mamdouh Habib,” BBC News December 7, 2005.
182 Agamben, Homo, 170.
avoided at all costs. Arjun Appadurai writes that the suicide bomber “takes to the extreme the problem of uncertainty.”\(^{183}\) As a rule, he “thrives in the spaces of civilian life,” blending in with the population: a stranger who appears to be one of the “friends,” but who holds a dreadful secret close to his chest. He literally embodies the chaotic potential of uncertainty to wreak havoc on order: “an explosive body that promises to distribute its own bloody fragments and mix them in with the bloody parts of the civilian populations it is intended to disseminate.”

The metal detector, one of modernity’s great tools for sweeping a population clean of future disaster, probes the inner core of the suspected suicide bomber for evidence of guilt. It is also one of the more conventional prevention procedures; in the camp, where civil law is overtly excepted, tactics are more invasive. While those thrown into camps may be de-facto homo sacer, the original riddle of their ambivalence is still yet to be understood. What interrogators most explicitly seek is a confession, a confirmation of guilt. Those who have committed the crimes they are charged with often will not talk; those who have nothing to confess simply can’t. More than a few stories have emerged out of Guantanamo alleging torturous tactics, including “cavity searches” and other forms of quite intimate, and painful handling of bodies, which may result in confessions of guilt, falsified if necessary.\(^{184}\) The stranger is thus empirically proven as not only the enemy, but able to be dissected and fully known.


Appadurai has written extensively about how even outside the fences of state-sponsored camps, such procedures of bodily probing, which may include brutal forms of vivisectionist violence, serve as methods of producing uncertain bodies and forcibly inserting them back within known realms. He specifically addresses the “modern state-level forces [that] tend to generate large-scale [ethnic] identities,” and how these identities provoke “cognitive anxiety” about the truth of signifying features.\textsuperscript{185} Citing Liisa Malkki’s account of the Tutsi necrographic maps, among other examples, of brutal violence between rival ethnicities, Appadurai points to the intimate forms of violence that can occur as a way of remaking unknown bodies into tangible identities. Just as necrographic maps guided the violence between Tutsis and Hutus towards specific markers of difference, Appadurai examines often-systematic procedures of dismembering, disemboweling, or cannibalizing bodies of unknown others. These vivisectionist forms of violence can “create a macabre form of certainty and can become a brutal technique (or fold discovery-procedure) about ‘them’ and, therefore, about ‘us.’” As a way of grasping the meaning of the “intolerable anxiety” created by cross-border flows of people and identities, fear and violence attempt to salvage the orderly discursive structuring of the world through the remaking of individual bodies.

The profound anxiety caused by the impenetrability of large-scale categories is quite possibly due to Terranova’s notion that such totalities subtly hint at their complexity, without revealing it. The same can be said of the symbolic unity of the turban. Puar has pointed to the intimate attention often paid towards the turban itself during hate crimes, in which “turbans are clawed at viscously and unshorn hair

is pulled, occasionally even cut off.”\textsuperscript{186} She remarks that the removal and/or unraveling of the turban is also one of the most common trends within violence against turbaned men. Soon after 9/11, reports grew of turbans being unraveled and removed during airport security screenings; Sikh communities quickly rallied against such humiliating practices, requesting that turbans be scanned for weapons with wands instead.\textsuperscript{187} Just as in the Hutu necrographic maps, the very signifier that marked the turban-wearer as strange became the site of intimate investigation as to its “contents.”

The violence of probing, marking, and handling, added to the social violence of liminality and discrimination—this is the fate of those strangers who have somehow accrued the markings of threat. If they do not belong to a class of established linguistic signifiers of fear, they will be soon be put there through their visual signification; out of the chaos of affect, the order of fear discourse holds sway. The production of enemy bodies through forced violence, imprisonment, or probing, is one more method of grasping the ungraspable; uncertainty not only actualizes threats within discourse, but also demands that their bodies be marked, or confined, in such a way that ambiguity is nullified. These practices also beg the question: can the meaning of uncertainty truly be settled in the discovery of weapons, or the ascription of guilt? Is it only weapons that are being searched for, or meanings and answers infinitely harder to realize? Are camps designed to confine strangers for the sole virtue of order in itself— or does order guarantee something else infinitely more valuable?

\textsuperscript{186} Puar, \textit{Terrorist Assemblages}, 179.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid. 167.
Henry David Thoreau is said to have cautioned: “We are always paid for our suspicion by finding what we suspect.” His warning lends a double meaning to the current analysis. Through the innate desire of uncertainty to become known and understood, objects and identities that are truly unknowable can yet be remade, and cast into the realm of ordered signification. At the same time, while processes such as vivisectionist discovery, violent bodily investigation, and political exception may reveal or produce what was thought to be lacking, through these same processes we may yet discover truths previously un-thought of. The prisoner may crack under interrogation, but the truths he tells may yet be fictional—“truths,” which in their very falsehood, might indicate more incriminating realizations about the procedures used to extract them.

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The English port city of Dover is often referred to as “the gateway to Britain.” Over the past decade, it has become for many “a permanent transit camp” of global refugees seeking asylum—the young and old from around the globe fleeing desperate conditions, who temporarily settle in Dover before they are either given leave to enter Britain, or are “removed,” back out of the country. In 2002, the British government received a record 84,130 applications for refugee status, with a total of almost 111,000 asylum-seekers waiting in limbo for official admission.

New arrivals who immediately file an application are often given housing and other

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189 On official regulations governing the admittance of refugees, see the ICAR (information centre about asylum and refugees), section “3.1.3 decision process.” Online at: http://www.icar.org.uk/?lid=6997.

social support by the government until a decision is reached; they aren’t however, permitted to hold jobs without having attained refugee status, unless granted special permission. Given the average tens of thousands of backlogged cases, semi-permanent communities of largely unemployed asylum-seekers have developed in Dover and other “gateway” towns.191

Beginning in the late 1990’s, rising numbers of asylum-seekers were met with increasingly visible anxiety among the British citizenry, escalating to frequent bouts of violence around the turn of the millennium. As the Telegraph reported in 2001, “The presence of groups of young foreign men in [Dover] has created tension,” leading to “outbreaks of racial violence, including the stabbing of 13 people during two nights of fighting in August 1999.”192 While in fact the majority of those seeking asylum in Britain were white in appearance, it was the large numbers of racially marked newcomers, particularly Romani, Afghans and Africans that attracted the brunt of the violence and outright hatred.193

These tensions were reflected in the political rhetoric of fear surrounding the issue of asylum. In 1998 the Dover Express published an article that referred to asylum-seekers as “human sewage.”194 Not long after in 2000, then-leader of the British Conservative Party William Hague made a series of public speeches concerning the rising numbers of refugee applicants in which he used the phrases “swamped,” “out of control,” and “flooded.” The comments sparked an uproar, with many accusing Hague of inciting fear of minority immigrants. In his own defense,

191 “Swamp,” BBC.
194 Jones, “Cauldron.”
Hague stated what he saw as the facts, “There is no question when we have more than 100,000 asylum-seekers in the queue … that we have a flow that is out of control.”\footnote{“Row,” 
\textit{BBC News}.} Hague was not the only one to stress this unmanageability of the asylum-seekers; plenty of rhetoric in that day stressed the problem in terms of taxpayers having to “foot the bill,” or “the maintenance of national security and the management of public services,” or of Britons feeling “overwhelmed.”\footnote{On public services and national security concerns, see speech given by Parliamentarian Michael Howard on September 22, 2004. Online at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolpda/ukfs_news/hi/newsid_3679000/3679618.stm}  

The \textit{asylum-seeker} as signifier had thus assumed a prominent, controversial position within national discourses of immigration, economics, and fear. It was also accompanied by a series of related signifiers that grew up around it: for its detractors, the asylum-seeker was often portrayed as a “welfare sponger,” reaping the benefits of housing and protection without needing to hold a job.\footnote{Zygmunt Bauman, \textit{Wasted Lives} (Cambridge: Polity, 2004) 54.} Hague became known for his tirades against the vast amounts “bogus asylum-seekers,” who falsely claimed to have been persecuted in their own countries. As with the any discursive fear signifier, the asylum-seeker expanded in its fearful significance as wild rumors spread and stuck. In Dover, reports flew around that asylum-seekers “receive cash handouts to buy mobile phones”; or even are “given money for cat food which they then spend on anything they fancy.”\footnote{Jones, “Cauldron.”} The press did their part to provide catchy narratives, including reports of an “East European town which is kept going entirely from the money bogus asylum-seekers beg on the London Underground.” Not to mention the leaflets disseminated by the Tory party stating...
that, “money is being spent on asylum-seekers while cuts are made in ‘social services provisions for the elderly.”’

These narratives were most likely able to hold credence through the affective capacities of the asylum-seeker, whose mere presence was able to provoke extreme cognitive and bodily anxiety. In many ways, the asylum-seeker is the globalized incarnation of Simmel’s archetypal stranger, who “comes today and stays tomorrow.” She defies multiple sets of oppositions at once. As a foreign émigré, but not yet nominally assimilated into the nation, she retains the political marks of the outsider; yet through her possibility of admission, she embodies the potential for alliance. The asylum-seeker also hides her true nature: she could be either the victim of oppression, or the sponger who victimizes the nation. Perhaps most terrifyingly ambivalent is the fact of her singular presence, yet which belies her implication in the stream of millions “like her” who at this moment are pouring in, and who may not be stopped.

In this latter respect, the asylum-seeker embodies an ambivalence unlike that of the potential terrorist who straddles the friend and enemy division—instead, she questions what Bauman might call the sacred division between waste and not-waste.

**Human Sewage, Global Waste**

Waste is the inevitable result of any productive process. In *Wasted Lives*, Bauman explains how global bodies of waste are generated through capitalist production: in its unstoppable impetus towards capital accumulation, and in the structural tendency for wealth to accrue predominantly within the dominion of a select global

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199 Mark Steel, “Be free to leave, although you’ll be arrested if you do.” *The Independent*, April 20, 2000.
elite, the continuous circulations of modern capitalist exchange inevitably produce wastes of all kinds. There is, for one, the material waste of garbage and toxic runoff; yet more harrowing is the profound human wastage of excess labor power, at once necessary and redundant for the profitable mobility and expansion of capital. While capital accumulation always requires a reserve army of labor, the ghostly forces of "market demands" and "efficiency requirements" will necessarily leave large numbers of bodies behind to eke out their existences on the verge of bare life.

From the perspective of forward-moving, capitalist development, these wasted lives are the "the unintended and unplanned ‘collateral casualties’ of economic progress." More than accidental casualties, however, they are in fact unavoidable outcomes: out of production, there are always byproducts, as some energy must always be lost through entropy. At the same time, some waste is recycled back into the system. These are the global flows of the domestic service economy, the proverbial migrant workers who are "willing to do the jobs others refuse to do." Displaced by violence, famine, or economic conditions, "refugees, the displaced, asylum-seekers, migrants, the sans papiers, they are the wastes of globalization."201

AbdouMaliq Simone discusses a "politics of invisibility" practiced by populations who have lost the ability for orthodox political traction within spaces subsumed and deterritorialized by virtual capital.202 Between and among the diverse visible structures of globalized social life, relational webs of invisibility may be

200 Ibid., 39.
201 Ibid., 38.
formed, along which goods and people may travel, and through which social bonds may congeal. It is networks such as these that form the patterns of migration and communication that, when they dare to show themselves (at a port of call, after a natural disaster) may appear so uncontainable and incomprehensible for the “visible” world. In these instances appear glimpses of the informal economies and invisible partnerships that stand opposed to the traditional, sanctioned avenues of economic growth that the developed world cannot live without.

It is all too fitting, then, that the *Dover Express* referred to foreign asylum-seekers as “human sewage.” As if from an unseen rupture in the global drainage pipes, this once hidden population of waste bubbled to the surface with seemingly no stopping in sight. Officially barred from holding jobs, these streams of globalized flotsam flooded the streets of towns like Dover, but could provide little economic or social recompense to the community. Fears of being swamped by incoming refugees were thus not exactly fears of overpopulation through sheer numbers; to quote Bauman again,

> Overpopulation is … a code name for the appearance of a number of people who, instead of helping the smooth functioning of the economy, make the attainment, let alone the rise, of indices by which the proper functioning is measured and evaluated all that much more difficult.

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203 “Asylum seekers are not entitled to work (unless special permission is obtained from the Home Office), or claim mainstream benefits and they do not fall under homeless or housing legislation. Asylum applicants are able to apply for support from the National Asylum support Service (NASS) but may be refused if they did not claim asylum as soon as ‘reasonably practicable’ after their arrival (unless their human rights would be breached as a result of withholding support)” ICAR, ibid.

Excessive waste is an impediment to growth; it should necessarily be properly disposed of and isolated within the proper zone of defecation, the anthropological structural homology to Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of the global periphery.\footnote{Richard B. Lee identified the social-spatial arrangement of the Ju/'Hoansi (!Kung) people of the Kalahari desert as consisting of five concentric rings. The outermost ring, before the exterior zone of the bush, is functionally termed, the “zone of defecation.” Richard B. Lee, \textit{The Dobe Ju/'hoansi} (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993).} If waste is not kept territorially separate, away from the wealth-accumulating core, it may contaminate the health of the life-world. Thus Parliamentarian Michael Howard’s declaration: “Britain cannot take them all”; it is simply not economically feasible for the wastes of capitalism to be able to reenter and contaminate the system.

The locution of “human sewage” directly evoked the anxiety many felt towards the overwhelming presence of refugees as not only unknown, but unnecessary. Crucially, the phrase was used to refer to the whole of asylum-seekers, but with particular reference to ethnic Albanian Kosovar refugees, who are generally understood as white.\footnote{“When People Are Described as ‘Human Sewage,’” \textit{The Independent}, May 31, 2001.} The fear, then, was not completely due to racism, despite the fact that racial fears were quite rampant, and racial narratives did often frame the surrounding discourse. Instead, the issue of race obscured that of waste, which lay behind the hatred and fear of all asylum-seekers as a discursive category. No matter the reasons for their exoduses, refugees all became de facto waste by existing within the liminal zone of asylum-seeker, unable to take part in productive processes. Indeed, the issue of waste permeated the entire discourse of spongers and bogus refugees. As one Dover resident told the press in 2001, “Gangs of men hang around all day and it's quite intimidating, my daughter feels scared to go out on her own.”\footnote{Jones, “Cauldron.”(Emphasis mine.)}
Added to the tactile terror provoked by the encounter with the refugee is the horror of waste in one’s midst. The asylum-seeker’s ambivalence as stranger is not simply one that defies the opposition of exterior/interior; it counteracts the categorical necessity of separating waste from the life-world.

As such, the impulse of both society and state is to institute the ban, the taboo, to exile the refugee or nullify her uncertainty. Yet Bauman notes that there is a fundamental difference between the figure of the asylum-seeker and that of homo sacer, in that the latter is a “legitimate target” of the state, while the former is a mere “collateral casualty,” who appears to be free of blame with regard to law. For incarceration to be plausible, the discourse of asylum must avoid its inherent contradictions and figure these liminal bodies as always already threatening.

In 1999, such an attempt was made when the British government established a “reception facility,” in the town of Oakington for refugees deemed unlawful—ostensibly determined to be likely to abscond, and live illegally within the population. Surrounded by barbed wire, inmates in the camp were not allowed to leave until their applications had been processed, when most were given “removal orders.” However in mid-2001, the courts deemed that inmates were being held unlawfully, ruling that they “had committed no crimes and were not considered likely to flee.” This ruling occurred shortly before the 9/11 attacks; afterwards, more camps were built with “looser” restrictions: refugees were nominally allowed to leave, but food and clothing services would only be available inside, de facto

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208 Ibid., 39.
ensuring the institutionalized containment of all asylum-seekers.  

Meanwhile the news media and some politicians had begun to directly conflate asylum-seekers with terrorism. Newspapers and tabloids intentionally seized on the issue of global terrorism, dispatching reporters to find any evidence of wrongdoing by asylum-seekers, and then frame it within discourses of national security. At the same time, the premise of terror opened the door for re-evoking other sources of anxiety; the Sun, for instance decried that “we have an open invitation for terrorists to live off of our benefits.” Already heightened anxiety over asylum-seekers around the turn of the millennium was forcefully re-centered within the discourse of terror. These associations held credence for many, and contributed to the political background that justified the creation of new reception centers.

The collective perception of a new global threat immediately altered the meaning of asylum-seeker as linguistic signifier, elevating its categorization to that of imminent danger. The battle of its signification, and thus over the biopolitical status of the refugee’s body, was fought within the realm of discourse. Despite some level of outcry from other newspapers and government officials, links between asylum-seekers and terrorism gained traction by providing a tangible focal object for terror fears, while seeming to resolve the ambivalence of the refugee.

The Ambivalence of Waste

210 “Asylum seekers Centre to stay open despite criticisms,” Community Care, August 24, 2008.
212 Bauman, Lives, 54.
As it turns out, however, the riddle of the asylum-seeker cannot be easily solved, and her guilt not definitively determined. Attempts to restrict the rights even of terror suspects who claim asylum have been highly debated, and a motion to require all refugees to carry cards bearing fingerprint and photographic identification has been struck down.\textsuperscript{214} The reason is that \textit{asylum-seeker}, as a discursive entity, necessarily wears its ambiguity on its sleeve, and cannot be easily overruled. Through its very articulation, the term exposes the contradictions inherent to the idea of providing refuge for the global waste that must necessarily be excluded.

British laws of asylum bear out this paradox. The process of being approved for refugee status includes careful interviewing of the candidates, to ascertain whether or not the “person has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”\textsuperscript{215} If it is determined that the candidate rightfully deserves “humanitarian” inclusion based on “inhumane” conditions experiences previously, the seeker is cleared of the suspicion of being “bogus,” and may allowed into the country. If not, “removal directions” are given for the flushing away of the now confirmed wastrel. As Michael Howard put it, the system is designed so that it “helps genuine refugees and gives priority to those who want to come to Britain, work hard and make a positive contribution.”\textsuperscript{216} These interviewing processes are functionally equivalent to the bodily probing and interrogations meant to produce the guilty subject in the camp: the genuine refugee is produced out of the desperate need to separate out waste from the collective body.

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\textsuperscript{215} ICAR, section “3.1.1 international refugee law.” Online at: \url{http://www.icar.org.uk/6924/31-law-and-process/311-international-refugee-law.html}
\textsuperscript{216} Howard 2004 speech, ibid. (Emphasis mine).
This would appear to give immigration caseworkers the virtual right to declare a state of exception, possessing ultimate authority to determine the rule. Yet there are several conditions in which the law prevents waste from simply being flushed away. In one, “Humanitarian Protection” may be “granted to people who have been refused refugee status, but cannot be returned to their country of origin as they face a serious risk to life or person,” as mandated by the European Convention on Human Rights.217 A person may therefore be inadmissible, relegated to the realm of waste, but is nevertheless deserving of internationally recognized human rights. With one exception: “Serious criminals, including war criminals, terrorists or others who pose a threat to national security and anyone who is considered to be of bad character, conduct or associations are excluded from these provisions.”

And yet there remains even an exception to the exception (to what itself was the original exception): “Discretionary Leave” may be “granted outside the immigration rules in very limited circumstances to people who have been refused refugee status but who do not fulfill the criteria for HP classification”; these requests may be made on the grounds of privacy infringements, claims of being tortured, age limits, or any justifiable case. Quite remarkably, even those individuals determined to be serious criminals, already acknowledged as unworthy of their rights, are nevertheless reserved the possibility of recognition of their humanity.

This chain of exceptions is extremely significant: within the very act of separating waste from non-waste, destruction from creation, is the acknowledgement that these two strata of social reality are inherently interlinked.

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217 ICAR, ibid.
The potential within the wasted life for productive life is symbolized by the jurisdictional impossibility of being denied human rights. The latter are simultaneously both the rights of humans, and rights of access to the human; within the possibility of “Discretionary Leave” is the possibility of eventual access and admission into the life-world of citizenship.

The end result is that the law, to paraphrase Agamben, “lays bare the inner structure” of the asylum-seeker. Instead of the as-yet-undecidable wastrel or worker, bogus or credible refugee, the asylum-seeker is always in a state of becoming. The very fact of her passage, in hope, from the world of waste to that of alleged economic prosperity signifies her as the embodiment of both the promise of progress and the fact of its necessary destruction. Whatever world she flees is just as real as the one she sails towards, and in the journey lies her potential for transformation.

Waste, then, cannot be a fixed category. While the process of interviewing allows the governing authority to develop a case of evidence as to their designation of waste/non-waste, the exceptions provided for in the law make clear that such distinctions are always arbitrary, culturally determined. Just as Ferdinand de Saussure exposed the arbitrariness of the linguistic signifier’s relationship to its signified, the law of asylum exposes the fact that any system of signs to determine the markings of a bogus asylum-seeker is necessarily constructed. As Mary Douglas has noted,

In chasing dirt, papering, decorating, tidying… we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively reordering our environment, making it conform to an idea … In
short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.\textsuperscript{218}

The waste we produce is the waste we, on some level, \textit{choose} to produce. The anxiety of the asylum-seeker is then due to the profound uncertainty of the dissolution of all categories. If any and all waste has the potential for productive capacities, then the reverse must also be true—that there may be very little preventing anyone from being declared excessive, wasteful.

The encounter with the asylum-seeker consists therefore in coming face-to-face with the realities of late modern capitalism; the discourse surrounding the plight of the refugee brings to light the horrors of the barely visible world of waste. The public’s attention is brought, for instance, to the hidden networks of “people smuggling” that often become the only methods for asylum-seekers to reach developed countries:

The gangs’ often cynical disregard for the welfare of their human cargo was brought into stark relief when the bodies of 58 Chinese immigrants were found in the back of a sealed container in a lorry at Dover in June 2000. They had all suffocated. It latter transpired that each of those on board had paid tens of thousands of dollars to Chinese smuggling gangs known as "snakeheads" to get to the UK...\textsuperscript{219}

Despite these horrid accounts, the political reality of the asylum-seeker demands that many of these people will be inevitably turned back into those worlds; soon

\textsuperscript{219} Howard, ibid.
after uttering the above remarks, Conservative Party member Michael Howard continued with the assertion that, “Genuine refugees will be welcomed, but those who are not will be swiftly removed.”

The asylum-seeker is thus the paradigmatic anxiety-provoking figure of the late modern developed world. By seeking entry into the privileged world, she questions the very idea of a legitimate divide between waste and non-waste; yet the revealing power of asylum-seeker as signifier and subject of discourse disallows all attempts at suppressing the contradiction it poses.

Fear of the asylum-seeker is the result of both ontological and representational ambivalence; or rather, the narrativization as ambivalent of affective ontology. The haptic turbulence generated from the encounter (mediated or personal) with the asylum-seeker as outsider/racialized body is placed into a discursive realm that lays bare the disturbing contradictions of modern society. Current discourses of fear and containment of the asylum-seeker have revealed, and continue to reveal not only these unthinkable themselves, but our extreme proclivity to repress them through and within the body of the wasted life. Out of fear, massive discursive networks are built up around the idea of spongers, terrorists, and overpopulation, but it is through these interrogative and rhetorical measures taken to isolate and culturally determine the refugee body that our distinct inability to do so is revealed.

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We may now turn for a final time to France in 1789, with fresh insight on the elusive identity of the brigand. Many acts for which brigands were evoked as culprits were in fact peasant revolts, proletarian demonstrations, or grain rioting;
many others would have been incidents of petty theft, the reaping of corn, and other crimes committed not by malicious brigands, but by the wandering unemployed of the recent depression. According to Lefebvre,

The idea that there were ‘brigands’ in and around Paris was a fairly general one and indeed the king had lent it support in order to justify his calling in troops; the bourgeoisie too needed the threat of brigands as a legitimate excuse to form their militia. These brigands, whose existence was so desperately needed for political reasons, were in fact the floating population of Paris, mainly the local unemployed: their numbers were swollen by workers … small-time smugglers … and the usual wanderers who always hang about any great city.\(^{220}\)

Not only did authorities of all sorts certainly play a role in providing believable narratives to actualize fear, but moreover the target of these fears was the existing population, grouped together and re-produced as a mythical discursive unity. Thus the fear of brigands was not fear of these drifting bodies of waste, per se, but fear fed off of their affective strangeness, following a pre-established discursive path. But why was this narrative so powerful? The theory of the brigand not only provided an entity that could explain the disappearances of corn, and the violence of revolts, but it successfully erased all social ambivalence from the dynamic and unpredictable French population. As Clay Ramsay observes, the brigand’s perpetual identity as “outsider” allowed him to always exist as other, separate:

“Outsiders,’ even those who drew the attention of the police, were quite varied socially. Which people were designated outsiders depended on the designators’ locations, perspectives, and points of view. For this reason, the fear of “outsiders” was eminently ideological, in the classic sense of masking social classes from consciousness.”

Social classes were, at the time, drastically unstable; it was not uncommon for landowners or others who had become impoverished after the failure of the harvest to “slip into brigandage.” The French Revolution was, in part, the final casting aside of the fetters of feudalism—if only to replace them with those of the emerging capitalist order. If the brigand allowed the instability of class to become invisible, it is because the possibility of liquefied class structures was simply unable to be thought.

For the same reasons, during the “Swing” riots throughout England in 1830, the mysterious rioters who had been destroying the threshing machines and causing general instability were discursively known as “strangers,” and sometimes referred to as “smugglers,” “poachers,” and “Jews.” Even though the riotous workers were members of the very communities they terrorized, and were responding to quite real destitute working conditions, the specter of the stranger was called up through the necessity of isolating anxiety to the realm of the knowable. Though the stranger or Jew may still be an anxiety provoking figure, laden with ambivalence, his role as such was firmly established within the social worlds of the late-18th century, and thus assumed a reasonable, knowable figure to pin as the locus social uncertainty.

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221 Ramsay, Ideology, 77.
Agamben has noted that within any articulation of the word *people* lies the fundamental fracture within biopolitics (the politics of life), consisting of the People as sovereign subjects of right, and the needy, wretched, excluded masses of the people, reduced to bare life. He marks the French Revolution as the turning point at which the once-stable class divisions melted into a single mass body, and as “the sole depositary of sovereignty, the people is transformed into an embarrassing presence.” From that moment onward, modernity has been “nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded”—or in Bauman’s terms, waste. The classic liberal ideal of uniting a single People therefore necessitates the de facto exclusion of waste.

It was the horrifying prospect of an agglomerated mass people that quite simply could not be thought of by the French peasantry in 1789. The violent events of that summer, and the hoards of destitute peasants stripping the fields of grain could not be understood as the realization of the bare life of those once noble people. Uncertainty had no proper narrative to grasp, and instead an entire mythology emerged around the specter of the brigand. Similarly, the “Swing” rioters could not be understood as local proletarians simply because to admit such a fact was to acknowledge that the population had necessarily been reduced to destitution and lawlessness.

More than two centuries after the Great Fear, the impossibility of successfully overcoming the bifurcation within *people* still remains unspeakable, and is precisely what is feared, understood, and ignored in the specter of the asylum-

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seeker. More and more, however, as evidenced by the desperate pleas of human rights advocates and others, this ambivalence is commanding the attention necessary for the issues posed by the production and exclusion of wasted lives to be addressed. If collective fear is known and understood through circulations of discourse, it can only be via these routes of information and knowledge production that nuanced understandings of refugees and other global outcasts can shatter totalizing images and fearful biases.
Conclusion

Ghosts of Collective Fear

Fear in the late-twentieth century, and continuing to our present times, has been said to assume an everyday presence, commanding an authority over life that demands an almost religious adherence. Late modernity is predicated on uncertainty. Bauman has used the term “liquid” to describe the continued melting of solids originally prophesized by Marx and Engels, to the point where all economic, social, and spacio-temporal relations are in constant states of flux, leading to the steady dissolution of social bonds. Ulrich Beck has referred to the “world risk society,” in which state power and life itself are figured within a regime of future danger. Massumi, in turn, points to the demise of ideological certitude, the liquefaction of capital, and widespread feelings of groundlessness and insecurity that leave the modern subject in a state of suspended “falling,” perpetually open to a world of impending doom.\(^\text{224}\) The subject-form is the accident-form, “being as being-virtual, virtuality reduced to the possibility of disaster.” Fear is “the objectivity of the subjective under late capitalism”—a virtual ontology within a milieu of potentiality.

This perpetual, impenetrable uncertainty has created what Patricia Clough has identified as an affective background way of life, seeking only to grab attention. Bauman and Massumi, among others, point the perpetual chaining of small-scale global and local disasters (“Global Warnings”) that actualize background affect, and

seem to hit the mass media waves during every news broadcast.\textsuperscript{225} These are the types of graphic news stories, such as the superpredator scare, that Glassner notes captured remarkable attention throughout the 1990’s, suggesting that their potency was due in part to “premillennial tensions.”\textsuperscript{226}

These tensions may have been sober reflections of the recent past as much as anxiety over the turn of the new millennium. Immanuel Wallerstein has traced the history of modernity through episodes of what he calls “transformational TimeSpace,” or brief events that mark a fundamental bifurcation, a moment of change, between two structural systems.\textsuperscript{227} For Wallerstein, historical systems are governed by particular formations of knowledge; thus transformational TimeSpaces mark a destabilizing breakdown of the current episteme. Up until the 1990’s, Wallerstein suggests, knowledge (including concepts of space and time) had been predicated on “the avoidance of embarrassing insightful analyses into the dark corners of reality, and the ideological masking of existing patterns of hierarchical privilege.”\textsuperscript{228} He locates the collapse of Communism in 1989 as marking a crucial transformation, characterized by financial uncertainty, anxiety over the growing world underclasses, and disillusionment with the possibility of any centrist or leftist movements to reconcile the increasing global economic polarization. Premillennial transformational TimeSpace thus marks the breakdown of confidence in the power of capital accumulation to bring order to the world; simultaneously, it represents a slowly increasing awareness of the voices of the global subaltern, and of the political

\textsuperscript{226} Barry Glassner, \textit{The Culture of Fear} (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xii.
\textsuperscript{228} Wallerstein, “SpaceTime,” 5.
and violent oppositions some groups may pose to the current world-system as it stands. These perspectives and global realities must be taken into account, Wallerstein writes, if the future is to be responsibly cared for, and if new systems of knowledge are to be put into place that allow for a rational comprehension of the world.

Wallerstein’s 1997 lecture would prophesy the attacks of September 11, 2001 as gruesome evidence of global transformation. After that day, worlds of knowledge seemed to open up, revealing powerful anti-American and anti-systemic movements, invisible networks of “cells” that defy national boundaries, and multitudes of non-Christian religious devotees. In the words of then-Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge: “I don't think that the horizon that we look at should be anything other than accepting the reality that we are a target. Everything we stand for is anathema to all these people who would do us harm.” If September 11 means anything ultimately symbolic or transformational, it may be the sudden, horrifying revelation of previously invisible networks and populations that span the globe, and who ostensibly wanted to destroy “everything we stand for.”

This irruption in the fabric of pre-9/11 global reality did raise some questions as to the ability of traditional economic and governance models to cope the world’s challenges: global leaders began to discuss the historical role of the U.S. in the Middle East, as well as the possibility that current flows of global capital had contributed directly to the creation of “fertile ground,” for terrorism. At the same time, new revelations were distorted and cast in terms that masked their full

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significances; the discourse of terrorism was often couched in twentieth century
terminology (e.g. “The Axis of Evil”); and terrorism itself was portrayed not as a
complex geo-political phenomenon but as a matter of fanaticism and monolithic
hatred. As Wallerstein notes, transformational TimeSpace poses a choice between
“alternative, indeed conflicting visions of the good society, and that battle will be
ferocious.”

One explanation as to why new systems of knowledge have been difficult to
formulate is that global events have been seen through the constricting lens of fear.
After the 9/11 attacks, profound uncertainty within the American populace needed
to be given some solid footing from which these surprisingly catastrophic events
could be understood. As Foucault taught, discourse and knowledge are mutually
dependent, so that all discursive understandings fall within the limits of the
episteme or archive. While 9/11 may have re-centered threat discourse around the
central signifier of terrorism, its possibilities were still couched within the limits of
twentieth-century understandings of what global threats might consist of (e.g.
totalitarian nation-states, or repressive ideologies). Thus all collective
understandings of al-Qaeda, or of global matters, for that matter, could not
incorporate the full realities of the threat—including the fact that international
terrorism is to a large extent the violent outcome of American hegemonic policies.

Socio-linguistic explanations of fear tend to follow a path of least resistance;
to quote Lars Svendsen again, “when an emotion announces itself at full strength …

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233 “Suicide-terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear
strategic objective: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the
territory that the terrorists view as their homeland.” Pape, “Logic.”
given patterns of action can overrule all rational considerations."\textsuperscript{234} When faced with overpowering uncertainty, new understandings that press up against and surpass epistemic boundaries may be impossible to imagine. The horrifying ambivalence of the terrorist can only be understood in terms of set oppositions (good/evil), and he must therefore be exiled physically and figuratively within the determining confines of the camp.

If as Massumi suggests, fear is the “objectivity of the subjective” of late capitalism, then knowledge of the modern world, and thus of the challenges it poses, is necessarily knowledge as articulated by discourses of fear. Just as the French peasants of 1789 could only see phantom brigands where there was in fact social upheaval, the prospects of new thorough understandings of the world are undermined by the polarizations and limits of collective representations of fear.

For those who dare to look, however, evidence abounds of the contradictions posed by the historical systems of the twentieth century. Permeating flows of the informational milieu not only circulate stories and images of the global destitute and discarded, but depictions of collective threats may also suddenly reveal their complexity: in August 2008, alleged 9/11 architect Khalid Sheik Mohammed testified in a U.S. military court that Salim Hamdan, the former driver for Osama Bin Laden, was “unfit” for terror.\textsuperscript{235} Hamdan, who was accused of conspiracy and terrorism after being arrested with missiles in the backseat of his car, wasn’t trained to do harm to Americans, wasn’t even a member of al-Qaeda, but simply wanted to keep his driving job to earn money for his family. Mohammed explained further:

\textsuperscript{234} Lars Svendsen, \textit{A Philosophy of Fear} (London: Reaktion Books, 2007; translated by John Irons), 38.

"As the American Army [does, we] have drivers, cooks, crewmen and legal personal… We also, are human beings . . . we have interests in life. Our people have wives and children and schools. . . . You can not understand terrorism and al-Qaeda from 9/11 operation."

Hamdan’s trial was a test case for Bush Administration officials hoping to retain the right to try “suspects” without the oversight of the Geneva Conventions. Not only was this right denied by the Supreme Court; eventually Hamdan was sentenced to only 66 months in prison.

Public episodes like this one have begun to puncture and permeate discourses of fear, allowing for more thorough understandings of the often-arbitrary nature of isolating threat from non-threat, wheat from chaff. To put it another way, it is the realization of the power of rendering *homo sacer* as the production, and not reflection of fact. The first step in disseminating complex knowledge of the world is to shatter the totalizing dualistic perceptions of threat that often result from any collective sense of fear.

Avery Gordon has suggested the idea of complex personhood as a method of rethinking the identities and possibilities of ourselves, and those around us:

Complex personhood means that all people … remember and forget, are beset by contradiction and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others … Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are never that … Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and
These complexities, Gordon writes, are only some of the “ghostly matters” of the social world that lie hidden, virtual, or unspoken, but carry vast importance. They speak to the hidden complexity that may become noticeable in practices of interrogation, interviewing, deturbaning, probing or other forms of vivisection performed on those whom we fear. Thus the ghosts of globalized fear are in one respect the barely visible traces of wasted lives, whose movements may go undetected or ignored, and who, when made visible, often seem to bear the markings of threat.

Yet these ghosts are often concealed by others—phantom-figures, to use Lefebvre’s term— which emerge within discourse from the uncertainties of modernity. Equally complex, they mutate with stretches of the imagination, appearing in places previously unthought of. They may haunt our thoughts, and materialize as if they were real. It is these discursive entities that often cover up the underlying specters of waste, or hide them from view. Through the power of the re-evocation, categories and bodies of waste may slide easily into an emerging fear discourse seeking a tangible narrative. Statistical averages and other forms of compressed data also spawn emergent objects within discourse, creating the effect of unified trends or entities that may not reflect the extent of their make-ups.

The complexity and ambivalence of waste cannot, in fact, be ignored. Discourse surrounding asylum-seekers, not only in Britain but across the developed

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world too, provides daily evidence of the polarization of the world’s people, allowing for the double-edged possibility of both new knowledge and increased fear.

Emmanuel Levinas once pointed to the innate, ironic anxiety of life, which is the very anxiety that life itself poses: “the anxiety of death for a being that is precisely a being-toward-death. The able-to-be is in danger of death. But the able-to-be is precisely that threatens.” The social uncertainty that characterizes late modernity might be phrased similarly: the anxiety of waste for a being that is precisely being-towards-waste. We are all potential waste— one amalgamated people. Furthermore, as Agamben has shown, our bare life is always susceptible to being deemed homo sacer by the sovereign. This was James Yee’s realization upon his sudden arrest: the difference-marking line between friend/enemy is virtual; its function is to outline, and then actualize, possibility. If every wasted life has the potential for redemption, and vice versa, then the marking of difference along a particular semiotic scheme, or otherwise, necessarily creates a remainder of ambivalence, into which complex individuals are cast.

Thus one more category of ghostly fear remains to be identified: that of the ghostly potential for threat within oneself. For many, this threat is too great; Wallerstein cautions that out of these transformative times, “those in power will … try to ensure that the transition leads to the construction of a new system that will replicate the worst features of the existing one—its hierarchy, privilege and inequalities.” Economic, social, and physical structures of the current world-system function precisely to keep waste in its dumping sites: camps, ghettos, arid

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land. The deprivation of participation within formal exchange has led some populations to make the choice of invisibility as a means to survival; thus by default, masking themselves from view.\textsuperscript{239}

If we moderns are to emerge from this transformational period free from the fear of global uncertainties, such that the experience of global complexity is to be embraced, and not concealed, the totalizing phantoms of fear discourse must be revealed as merely spectral. Instead of blunt, totalizing unities, new positivities must emerge within discourses of fear that draw attention to the complexity of global issues, as they are identified. Just as the superpredator as fear signifier eventually lost its power after its validity was refuted in the press, action can be taken to identify the origins and meaning of regimes of fear signs, with the hope of bringing the collective closer to full understandings of threats. The figure of the asylum-seeker exemplifies the power of fear discourse to counteract totalities; political debate circulating within the informational milieu helps prevent fear from constricting knowledge within well-worn hegemonic limits, and to keep the feared from being so easily thrown into camps.

If there is one thing to be learned about collective fear, it is that the vacuum of uncertainty will inevitably be filled by fear objects, real or imagined. Thus one more line of action to prevent fear can be taken by muting the tocsin; Lefebvre tells the story of the cool-headed local authorities in Brittany who refused to spread rumors they had received, and prevented the tocsin from being rung.\textsuperscript{240} Fear as contagion, as toxin, can thus be effectively contained by refusing or even hesitating

\textsuperscript{240} Lefebvre, \textit{Fear}, xii.
to sound the alarm of threat, which can only stoke affect, and leave open the vast terror of uncertain futures.
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