

The Act of Killing: Authorship as Performance and the Mythology of National Identity

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live” – Joan Didion, “The White Album”

The performance of mythology within a culture or nation aims to maintain a collective identity, and often the topics of these performances or reenactments refer to acts of cruelty, destruction, murder and war. The Ancient Greeks wrote and performed theater about their spiteful murderous Gods. Sri Lankan national theater retells the Ramayana to remember the lineage of kings and victors of war, in doing so drawing a line to Sri Lankan national (racial) identity. European songs, novels, theatre and cinema produce iconography that glorifies wars responsible for the death and displacement of hundreds of millions.¹ As these performances and stories fuse with the definition of cultural or national identity, this collective identity begins to inherit and embody these performances in everyday activity and discourse as ritual, ultimately presenting this performance as truth, though the origin of its mythology may be unproven or absent from critical discourse. Catholic Holy Communion involves consuming “the very body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ.”² Performed through representation, consuming the body as the wafer, the blood as the wine, this act acknowledges the life and murder of a spiritual leader through a representative performance of cannibalism. The performance of national mythology can be seen in American cinema dating back to the turn of the century to D.W. Griffith’s racist film *The Birth of A Nation*, described by some scholars as having provided a post bellum United States “with its national myth of identity” by personifying stereotypes and maintaining this reenactment of a conjured history as a contemporary truth.³ Yet, it is not only in religion or fiction that cultures maintain myths. American popular news media, justifying war

and invasion through a mythology of “terror”, coupled with a popular culture of boisterous national exceptionalism, exemplifies contemporary performances that maintain a state of war, even if there may have never been a war to fight. President Bush’s post September 11th search for “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq proved that these “WMD’s” never existed, but troops have continue to occupy Iraqi soil years later. Immediately after the tragedy of the September 11th attacks it seemed as if every person in this country owned a U.S. flag as a bumper sticker, a miniature car window mount, a T-shirt, or a tattoo. The public display of patriotism has at its center, a performance, by a public that is also witnessing the performance of validating war, or making suffering a part of national identity. As Susan Sontag writes, “The Iconography of suffering has a long pedigree, the sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine, or human.”⁴ This terror-induced post-9/11 iconographic patriotism became a way to deny culpability and nationalize suffering—a whole nation as martyrs.

The popular cultural identity of the United States does not want to believe that there were valid motives behind the 9/11 attacks, as if the attacks were a random act of violence and the attackers simply hate America or “freedom,” and these myths are maintained to date. The popular media is a feed of iconography and rhetoric such as the ubiquity of the American flag, colloquial phrases or songs such as “Land of the Free, and the Home of the Brave,” or more subtly the idea that America is somehow (and has to always be) “number one,” and exempted from anything but essentialism. Though these tropes of promoting nationalism aren’t solely an American practice, they are certainly a part of the foundation that creates a collective identity of a nation, which projects a performance of patriotism that validates war, murder, invasion and cruelty. Maggie Nelson argues that if “we don’t turn our attention away [from popular media]—

or at least broaden our focus—we run the risk of floating further and further into the state described by Walter Benjamin as ‘an alienation that had reached such a degree that [mankind] can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’”⁵ But what if we didn’t turn our attention away? What if we had the opportunity to narrow our focus and see that we may indeed be causing the suffering of others too? Would we be able to endure this truth?

The Act of Killing

An acute perspective on the manifestation of a national mythology is rendered in Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary *The Act of Killing*. The film documents a performance crafted by Indonesian “Gangsters” and government officials who, to this day, openly claim responsibility for carrying out the government sanctioned genocide of “alleged communists, trade unionists, organized peasants, members of the women’s movement and anybody else the army considered a threat” in 1965-66.⁶

Oppenheimer’s film shows how the performative can maintain a shocking national mythology of righteousness through the open acknowledgment and validation of violence and cruelty. This acknowledgment at times seems a parody. Oppenheimer’s film attempts to illustrate that the history of the genocide is told openly through out Indonesia; all who live there know and (seem to) accept the brutality of this history. All who participated in the genocide portray themselves as exalted heroes or, as they call themselves: “free men”, and in their performance as heroes of a nation, are free to tell their history as they see fit.

The Act of Killing tells a story of how the mythology of triumph, as told by the triumphant, validates the evil of mass murder. The film’s subtextual narrative also tells a story in which the spectral force of a national mythology continues to support those who had set out to create and maintain a nation through fear.

In a close textual analysis this paper aims to discuss what the act in *The Act of Killing* is. Why is this *act* so familiar? How is this or any act of cruelty validated? What role does the performative play in the maintenance of myth and the exorcism of the demons of torture, murder and cruelty? Are these performances isolated to this film or nation or are they more prevalent within the construct of other familiar national identities that validate violence or mass murder, or war? I argue that this film shows that national mythology is maintained through a collective cultural performative authorship of the violent and cruel; such as the televised image of masses of marching troops, or in the accepted fear mongering rhetoric associated with “the war on terror”, or even in the glorification of violence and cruelty in television and cinema. *The Act of Killing* thus becomes a lens through which we can scrutinize other acts of cruelty that are validated by performance or spectacle, employed as a form of martyrdom to exorcise culpability within our own and other national or cultural collective identities.

Oppenheimer’s Arrangement: Four elements of performance

In a 2014 interview with Joshua Oppenheimer he clarified to me that the arrangement between the filmmakers and the “Gangsters” was that they were making a collaborative film about the history of the genocide, and that the *Act of Killing* is not a documentary about making a documentary.⁷ Instead it is one documentary film with two directorial bodies, Oppenheimer and the “Gangsters.” As far as the gangsters understood they were working with Oppenheimer to make a film that maintained the myth of their heroism. While planning for a more traditional documentary Oppenheimer fortuitously discovers that the “Gangsters” are aware of his presence in Indonesia and his interest in the genocide, and enthusiastically offer to help make a movie about their life achievement. The “Gangsters” offer to perform reenactments of the executions as they remember them, determined to make a film that immortalizes their deeds. As executive

producer Errol Morris describes, “Oppenheimer convinced these killers to act in a movie about the making of a movie about the killings, there would be reenactments of the murders by the actual perpetrators...a perverted hall of mirrors.”⁸ We are shown four elements of the “Gangster’s” performance process: research, rehearsal, enactment, and reception, all four elements mobilize reenactment for the maintenance of “history”, or mythology. In the context of the film, research, rehearsal, and enactment are all performances; in which the performer is engaging in their subjective history, vividly revealing emotion, while analyzing their roles in the killings.

The gangsters pose as old masters of cinematic portrayal, they claim to draw their acting *and* killing styles from Hollywood films. They are, in their minds, already stars, immortalized in the national propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30 S-PKI*—regular screenings of the film were once required by the Indonesian government.⁹ Throughout the film these immodest “free men” shamelessly talk of their freedom, wealth, and power and the murderous means by which they accumulated these privileges, they are praised on national television, and feared in public.

As the film progresses it becomes apparent that these gangsters are caught in a cycle of performance, even outside of Oppenheimer’s film. They perform to maintain a national identity as guardians of a mythology, and in this performance exorcise the ghosts of an openly validated and successful genocide. Curiously, it seems that these gangsters cannot distinguish performance from reality. The “Gangster’s” real life interactions with their community and day-to-day activity continue to maintain the national mythology that the genocide was an historical necessity. They are elected into governing power through bribery and acknowledgment of their roll in the genocide, and remain immune from persecution. As we see later in the film, participation in the genocide seems a prerequisite for being in any position of power in the country. The “Gangsters”

act as if their history of violence is heroic, necessary and unquestionably noble, maintaining that they are the righteous victors, while using fear and mythology as their weapons.

In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, Amy Goodman, of the radio and television news show *Democracy Now!*, opens the segment addressing *The Act of Killing* stating, “We’ll talk about whether it can be called a documentary.”¹⁰ She posits that what the film seems to do more than anything else is “examine political violence and the public imagination.”¹¹ The Indonesian public’s imagination is a key catalyst in maintaining this mythology through performance, and, in their perpetual reception, take part in this very performance, indirectly aiding in the validation of the genocide. Fredric Jameson reminds us that rapacious overexposure dulls the senses toward the subversive, in the case of this film, the ubiquity and overexposure of the gangster’s (and the nation’s) perpetual performance allow for the validation of genocide to become a vital element in the survival of a national identity.¹² Indeed, overexposure dulls the senses, yet makes concrete the subversive.

In the opening scenes of *The Act of Killing* we are introduced to the central figure of the film, Anwar Congo. Congo plays the leader of the small group of “Gangsters” who Oppenheimer has commissioned for the film. When we first see Congo, he is walking with a group who, aside from him, are all wearing the bright orange and black camouflage fatigues of the Pancasila Youth.¹³ The group is walking through a town and knocking on random doors trying to cast people for a scene in their film where they will reenact a raid and burn the home of a communist. Some of the townspeople are reluctant, but with the presence of film cameras many emerge to take part. After filming this scene Congo sits with his sidekick, Henry, and begins to discuss the importance of the film stating, “This is the history! This is who we are!” Congo then takes the filmmakers to an office building rooftop, the headquarters where, in 1965 he and other

“Gangsters,” executed alleged communists. He explains that “There are many ghosts here...” because they died “unnatural deaths,” then describes how the first the victims were beaten to death but there was too much blood, so they devised a system of choking the victim with a piano wire—something they admit to have picked up from American gangster films. Congo then demonstrates the technique on a friend after which he tells the camera that he has tried to forget these killings with dancing, music, alcohol and drugs. In a twisted conclusion to this sequence Congo dances the Cha-Cha on the rooftop—the rooftop where many died “unnatural deaths.” Was this the dance of an exorcist? His companion, amused by the dancing, explains to the camera that Congo is “a happy man.” Following this scene Congo goes to the house of the governor of North Sumatra who explains that the Indonesian word for “gangster comes from English and it means *free-men*,” and that, “thugs [gangsters] want freedom to do things even if they’re wrong.” This statement offers a curious interpretation of freedom, as if ‘free’ describes the immunity from one’s conscience.

The film is interspersed with demonstrations of the “Gangster’s” killing techniques and interactions with other men in power. In other segments of the film Oppenheimer records the staging, filming and reenactment of the interrogations and killings. We receive a behind the scenes view of costumes and make-up, discussions about content, and personal introspection. While getting their makeup done, Congo and another prominent and powerful “Gangster” Adi are addressed by Oppenheimer: “Naturally I want to know your opinion about the propaganda film,” referring to the national propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G 30 S-PKI*. Congo answers, “The film is the one thing that makes me feel not guilty. I watch the film and feel reassured.” Adi responds, “That’s how you feel? Not me. I think it’s a lie. It’s easy to make the communists look bad after we killed them.” For the first time in the film we are offered counterpoint to the

mythology. Next, on a soundstage in a thatched hut set, the two “Gangsters” reenact an interrogation and killing of a communist. Just before the rehearsal and filming, the actor who will play the communist is filmed by Oppenheimer candidly telling the story of how he and his grandfather had to bury his murdered father who had been executed for being a communist during the genocide. At the end of his story the actor apologetically says that he didn’t mean to offend any of the gangsters. This is the point in the film that Oppenheimer describes as taking a “nightmarish spiral.”¹⁴ During the rehearsal the actor playing the interrogated communist breaks down and begins to cry, it is unclear at first whether this is a part of the performance. Congo tells the crew to give the actor some water and a cigarette, after which Congo addresses his friend saying, “its sadistic Adi.” We begin to see that Congo struggles with the memories of his history, and he will continue to question the validity of his actions throughout the film. At the end of the rehearsal Adi addresses the group saying, “Listen, if we succeed in making this film – it will disprove all the propaganda about the communists being cruel. And show that we were cruel! We’re the cruel ones!” and “ the whole society will say ‘we always suspected it. They lied about the communists being cruel.’” Adi was realizing that this performance that was being staged, contradicted the performance the anti-communist regime had maintained since 1965. Adi and the others eventually agree that they couldn’t admit that their actions were wrong , for this would dispel a national myth.

Later riding in a car with Adi, Oppenheimer asks, “I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but I have to ask, by telling yourself it was ‘war’ you’re not haunted like Anwar. But the Geneva Conventions define what you did as ‘war crimes.’” Adi responds, “I don’t necessarily agree with those international laws. When Bush was in power Guantanamo was right. Saddam Hussein had Weapons of Mass Destructions. That was right according to Bush, but now

its wrong...war crimes are defined by the winners. I am a winner so I can make my own definition...and more important, not everything true is good.” Adi continues, asking why focus on his deeds alone? He states, “Americans killed Indians,” asking “has anybody been punished for that? Punish them!” There is clarity in this dialogue that seems out of place as the film returns to the surreal “nightmarish spiral.” The surreal exists in the fact that what one is witnessing on the screen is true! These gangsters are unbelievable but real and seem to have nothing to hide.

Nearly two-thirds into the film, Oppenheimer documents Anwar Congo appearing with other “Gangsters” on a national TV talk show, whose audience is full of Pancasila Youth in uniform.¹⁵ The show’s host begins with small talk, asking Congo who his favorite movie star is. She then acknowledges the role of the “Gangsters” in the genocide, and discusses the origin of the word gangster. She asks about the office in which the “Gangsters” killed and adds that she understood that their method of killing was inspired by American gangster films. Anwar explains that the strangulation method using piano wire was less messy more effective and more efficient. The host addresses the camera, rearranging perception, translates that “Anwar and his friends developed a new, more efficient system for exterminating communists. It was more humane, less sadistic, and avoided excessive violence.” It is seems that there are those who realize that the genocide was wrong; in the next scene we are taken to the TV station’s control booth where technicians are filmed by Oppenheimer talking while watching the broadcast, and asking how Anwar can live with himself, making it possible to realize that there are those in the country who have a foothold in reality, though it becomes quite frightening to wonder to what extent these dissident voices can survive in the world of the “Gangsters.” The show concludes with the host stating, “God hates communists...” to great applause. At this point in the film one begins to question again, what is real and what is performed. Can it be true that the technique of murder is

being broadcast on national television, by a murder? The nightmarish in the film is not the violence or cruelty or blatant admittance of it, rather it is in the vacillation between the real world, in which the gangsters thrive, and the world that they create to tell their version of history, until it becomes unclear what is real and what is staged. Not knowing where reality ends and begins the audience cannot distinguish between types of performances—the whole documentary becomes performance.

Some would argue that all documentary film or television is rooted performance. Elizabeth Marquies offers “that documentaries are founded on the creative interaction between a filmmaker and the reality on which she or he encroaches and that they thus must be seen as ‘performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming.’”¹⁶ When this moment of filming occurs in *The Act of Killing* the truth is hard to imagine, though it is being presented as truth. Just like Anwar Congo the truth presented in the film somehow isn’t quite sure of itself. Toward the end of the documentary Congo and other gangsters are filmed shooting a Film Noir inspired interrogation of “communists.” They are costumed like gangsters from American films. The “communist” is played this time by Congo himself. He is made up to look beaten, and bleeding. Between acting Congo pauses to take deep breaths, sitting blindfolded and tied to a chair as two “Gangsters” pull a piano wire around his throat. As they pull tighter, Congo pauses and stops acting, he sits motionless till the piano wire is removed, and looking dazed says, “I feel like I was dead for a moment.” The other “Gangster” tells him to breath deep and unties him. Congo goes catatonic. After drinking some water Congo tries the scene again. As they pull the piano wire around his neck he begins groaning, this is no longer acting, Congo signals the others to stop. His hand is shaking as he removes the blindfold saying, “I can’t do that again.” It seems that ghosts have been stirred out of Congo.

In an essay by Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo the authors state that it is not enough to perform brutal acts of cruelty, “one must also tell about it, rehearse it again in whispered performances and repeated gestures, if one wants to conjure the spectral power claimed during the massacre, and manifest it as a social force.”¹⁷ However, Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo do not mention what would happen if these performances should be witnessed first hand by the performer. The authors posit that “The performances of the killers as they rehearse these stories are what accomplish this conjuration” of a mythological social force,¹⁸ and that “Gangsters” like Anwar Congo, “need neither themselves believe all they say, nor need their audience, for the conjuration to be effective, any more than they need believe in the propaganda about the murderous [communists] to act *as if* they believed it.”¹⁹ In other words, if acts of cruelty are revisited, performed and accepted in national daily life, the spectral force of a national performance of acceptance will maintain the myth, regardless of truth. But when those who participate in the mythology see themselves perform in the “perverted hall of mirrors” either as killers or as victims, they expose a rift in the spell of the conjured stories, revealing a devastating truth.

Later in the film Congo asks Oppenheimer to play the footage of the scene in which Congo is tortured. After watching the footage he asks Oppenheimer, “Did the people I torture feel the way I do here?” Then, “I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed...and then fear comes right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body.” Oppenheimer responds with, “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse – because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.” Congo looks confused saying, “I can feel it Josh. Really feel it. Or have I sinned?” Then crying, professes, “I

did this to so many people, Josh.” This interaction takes us out of the nightmare returning to the reality that what has happened is real—and wrong.

The reality of murder, is often forgotten when it is sanctified as war. Susan Sontag argues, “The scale of war’s murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals, even as human beings. This, of course, is how war looks when it is seen from afar, as an image” or a memory.²⁰ Congo’s memories of the killings are not about the individual victims, until he experiences the killings in a performance as the victim. Congo, witnessing his performance as a victim, reaches beyond myth and breaks down in tears and confronts the truth. The spectral force of a performance that maintains the mythology of righteousness breaks down, and Congo’s remorse appears for a brief moment. This spell of performance, Oppenheimer writes, “has the power to conjure terror, and somehow, as with [all] ghost stories this power is attractive; we *want* to hear stories, even or perhaps especially, terrifying ones; we voluntarily pace ourselves under the spell of the terrifying effects of stories.”²¹ Congo has been under a spell, a spell that he had cast on himself in a performance that validates cruelty. It does not matter whether he believes the killings were right or wrong, he has been socially immune to this scrutiny for decades. What is important is that there is an antidote to the spell. Is this antidote merely a self-reflective cinema? I dare not speculate.

If Not a Documentary then what?

In her interview with Oppenheimer, Amy Goodman asks if his film can be considered a documentary. I had an identical reaction on my first viewing of the film. If this film is not a documentary, or an observation of reality what is it? Is it a polemic hoping to inoculate the spell over a nation? Riding on the heels of its executive producer, Errol Morris?

On March 5th 2014, in an article titled “What Indonesians Really Think About *Act of Killing*,” *The Guardian* reported about the reaction of Indonesian audience members toward the film. One audience member “questioned the film’s ‘happy ending’, in which the main character, a death-squad leader named Anwar, seems to repent for his actions. He explained that the happy ending in *The Act of Killing* didn’t mirror the state of affairs in Indonesia, because there has been no reparation for the killings of 1965-66. The audience member wondered if Anwar might be acting for the camera and also think that most viewers want a tidy ending.”²² The audience member goes on to accuse Oppenheimer of being duped by Congo who’s life long dream to act in the movies was realized when Oppenheimer showed up with cameras and a crew. And that Congo took this opportunity to act, and faked remorse.²³ The film has been distributed in Indonesia “through a network of underground distributors and social media,” and “*The Act of Killing* has now been viewed by millions of Indonesians. Government and anti-communist organizations continue to try to stop its distribution, but their efforts are ultimately futile in the internet age.”²⁴ Notably the article also reports that still,

gangster capitalism, corruption and censorship plague Indonesia's social landscape. It is not in the interests of the upper rungs of Indonesian society to analyze the atrocities or seek justice for the victims. There is still a sense that the average Indonesian has no rational alternative to the status quo. A vote for a political candidate puts bread on your table. Bribery and racketeering provide what one Indonesian woman described as ‘a heaven in this hell.’²⁵

Though there has been a hugely positive reaction to the film, it seems that there has been little action. If Oppenheimer's film begs for international attention, it seems that at the very least the story has been told and heard, as the 2014 Academy Award nomination proves.

Still, what is this story? If it does not document or observe an "Other" and its message is has yet to spur action, what does it aim to tell or do? I argue that the focus of this discussion turn toward what the film *can* do, rather than what it does or tells. It can raise questions about how documentary is created and received. The majority viewership may hope that Oppenheimer's film might be as effective as Errol Morris' *Thin Blue Line*.²⁶ But that was a film that liberated *one* man, not an entire nation.²⁷ Additionally it is hard to call *The Act of Killing* a documentary because it doesn't quite define itself as an observation or report; rather, it is a vision of a microcosm that reflects back to (at the very least) an American viewership, a possibility that all documentary is a performance, be it filmic, televised or reported as news—particularly when contrasted against the accusation by the Indonesian audience member charging that Congo was *acting* remorseful.

If we dismantle *The Act of Killing* and try to decipher what is real and what is performance we become tangled in a web of uncertainty. It could be that the "Gangsters" are putting on a show for a Western filmmaker, but they do this for Indonesian cameras too. They continue to perform the narrative of their myth, they know what they did is wrong, but this is not a revelation. They admit what is wrong but it is of no matter because it is easy to admit wrongdoings when there is no consequence, and in their world this admission of truth is a part of a national identity, for if Indonesia begins to persecute the "Gangsters" then they must review the history of the entire nation's validation of genocide. As an American audience we can look to

our own media and visual history and ask whether it has recorded and projected a performance that maintains mythologies, as each element of performance does in *The Act of Killing*.

Most will acknowledge that the atrocity of the North Atlantic Slave Trade was wrong. It is hard to ignore the proof that Africans were kidnapped and shipped to European and American cities and forced to work without pay for hundreds of years. Many will also agree that the plight of indigenous cultures in America is bleak and that the history of European invasion, and genocide in the Americas is appalling. Millions of indigenous peoples have lost their lives, homes, and cultural identity to imperialism and colonialism, but as the “Gangster” Adi charges, no one has been punished for this continuing genocide. Several American newspaper articles from the 1800’s report of “Indian” attacks against Westward settlers, though very few question the motives behind the attacks. Instead the reports resound with sympathy for the attacked. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John P. Clum was quoted in 1876 stating, “The true policy [of the War Department], in my judgment, is to send troops against [the Indians] in the winter, the sooner the better, and whip them into subjection. They richly merit punishment for their incessant warfare and their numerous murders of white settlers and their families, or white men, whence found unarmed.”²⁸ And as history has shown, westward American expansion has all but wiped out indigenous cultures, and those responsible for this horror have continued to accumulate wealth and power, maintaining the myth that no group of people could be held responsible for imperialist invasion and murder.

American military casualties in the war on Iraq, as of 2016, were reported at 3409.²⁹ The “documented civilian [Iraqi] deaths from violence” is currently nearing 300,000.³⁰ The presence of American and coalition forces can be said to have been responsible for these deaths. When considering the ratio between dead Iraqis to dead American Military troops one could argue for a

discussion about genocide. The population of the city of Berkeley California is 115,403. Would the extermination of that population go unnoticed? Instead of admitting that the Iraqi War is wrong, American leaders stand in front a of national television audience and discuss the strategy of the occupation in Iraq as a necessity, and a withdrawal of all American influences would disrupt the pursuit of Iraqi democratic freedom. In Indonesia's story the government purged communism from their country by killing. In Iraq, coalition forces purged an anti-imperialist dictatorial power and killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens to insert "democracy" into Iraq and secure control over a country that was deemed a threat to Western global hegemony. Isn't the rhetoric of democracy a performance similar to the anti-communist propaganda of the Indonesian government? When Anwar Congo describes how efficient his killing technique was to the TV reporter, does this moment not conjure gruesome images from American media such as the photos of bound and blindfolded military prisoners, or even the humiliated inmates of Abu Grahib? Anwar Congo's descriptions of torture and murder on television are despised by some of the Indonesian viewership watching, yet are an accepted part of nationalist rhetoric; just as most Americans acknowledge that the photos taken at Abu Grahib are wrong and cruel, but somehow aren't moved to challenge the very occupation that set the stage for those photos.³¹

When President Barack Obama announced the killing of Osama bin Laden on national television, the performative is hard to ignore. Obama is giving a *rehearsed* and *prepared* speech—more than likely written by someone else—from a teleprompter. The camera shows a deep hallway, Obama appears in the distance and walks calmly toward the podium. In his opening statement The President reports "to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, and a terrorist who is responsible for the murder of *thousands* of innocent men women and

children.”³² Obama clearly states that this terrorist was responsible for *thousands* of murders. But what of the *hundreds of thousands* of Iraqis to date, who is responsible for this? These Iraqis didn’t attack the U.S. on September 11th 2001, nor were they hiding “WMD’s.” So why are we fighting in Iraq? Obama continues, stating, “the images of nine eleven are seared into our national memory.” Then dramatically reminds us why we are at war:

Hijacked planes cutting through a cloudless September sky, the twin towers collapsing to the ground, black smoke billowing up from the pentagon...yet we know that the worst images were those unseen to the world. The empty seat at the dinner table, children who were forced to grow up without their mother, or father, parents who would never know the feeling of their child’s embrace...nearly 3000 citizens taken from us [Including the victims of the Twin Tower attacks would put the American death toll mentioned earlier at around 6400].³³

At the end of his speech, the president turns around and walks down the sparse deep hallway. His has left the stage.

It might be argued that many presidential administrations can claim responsibility for the deaths of millions throughout the history of the United States, in fact it could be said that all Americans can claim responsibility. In the case of Oppenheimer’s film about Indonesia we can focus culpability on the military coup and the “Gangsters” because they openly admit their killings as murders in the name of democracy, and most importantly because we can attribute a head count to at least one representative of these “gangsters.” Congo admits to have killed over

1000 “communists” alone. Though there is no official number for the Indonesian genocide. The body count is estimated to be over 500,000; some reports say over 1,000,000.³⁴ This number is mind boggling when attributed to the small number responsible for the killings.

In 1966, a year after the Indonesian government was overthrown by a military coup and the genocide was in full force, the New York Times reported “A Gleam of Light in Asia,” that marked the “savage transformation of Indonesia from pro-Chinese policy under [ousted president] Sukarno to a defiantly anti-communist policy under General Suharto.”³⁵ The article doesn’t deny the U.S. involvement in the coup and genocide, but acknowledges that it was a possibility stating, “Washington is being careful not to claim any credit for this change...but this does not mean that Washington has nothing to do with it.”³⁶ The makers of *The Act of Killing* add that in fact, “the scapegoating of the ethnic Chinese, who had come to Indonesia in the 18th and 19th centuries, was done at the incitement of the US intelligence services, which sought to drive a wedge between the new Indonesian regime and the People’s Republic of China.”³⁷

When examining the performative in rhetoric of national identity we see that what this performance aims to do is maintain that we are morally innocent of crime. If morality is subjective, then one’s morality or a nation’s morality is an absolute invariable and just truth. That is, one’s own morality is as true as one believes it to be. For if we question our morality, we instantly become guilty of the crime of lying, to ourselves, about how cruel we really are. But when we examine another culture’s actions of cruelty we can easily see that they are indeed cruel, because as an observer of this cruelty one’s subjective morality is always more just than another’s. If you believe something, and morally hold it to be just, then another’s belief in the opposite would naturally be unjust. What *The Act of Killing* then *does* is offer an opportunity to take the performance of our *own* national mythologies of morality or righteousness, be it in film

television or news, and insert this imagery into the into the “perverted hall of mirrors.” And if we do, we may see that we too openly acknowledge American responsibility for the mass murder and displacement of indigenous cultures, the illegal seizure of wealth and resources from the Middle East, the unlawful imprisonment and torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, or more close to home, the blatant disregard and displacement of the survivors of hurricane Katrina. And though we acknowledge these acts of cruelty, we have yet to punish those who have done these cruel things.

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 40.

² Robert H. Brom, ed, "Who Can Receive Communion." *Catholic Answers: To Explain and Defend the Faith*, Catholic Answers, 11 Mar 2013. Web. 11 Mar 2014.

³ Michael, Rogin, "Black Face, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer finds his Voice," *Trans. Array Critical Inquiry* 18 No. 3 (1992): 417-453.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 40.

⁵ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York: W.W. (Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 4.

⁶ Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, "Show of Foirce: A Cinema-Seance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt," *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York & Chichester, West Sussex: Wallflower Press and Columbia University Press, 2012) 287-310.

⁷ Joshua Oppenheimer, Telephone Interview by Aruna Ekanayake, 08 Feb 2014.

⁸ Errol Morris, "The Murders of Gonzago." *The Act of Killing Essay: How Indonesia's Mass Killings Could Have Slowed the Vietnam War*. Slate, 10 Jul 2013. Web. 11 Mar 2014. <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/07/the_act_of_killing_essay_how_indonesia_s_mass_killings_could_have_slowed.html>.

⁹ *Pengkhianatan G 30 S-PKI*. Indonesian Government, 1965. Film. Accessed 11 Mar 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddYExsNtX6w>>.

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- ¹⁰ Amy Goodman, "The Act of Killing: New Film Shows U.S.-Backed Indonesian Death Squad Leaders Re-enacting Massacres." *Democracy Now!*. 19 Jul 2013.
<http://www.democracynow.org/2013/7/19/the_act_of_killing_new_film>.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: Dog Day Afternoon as a Political Film," *College English, Mass Culture, Political Consciousness and English* 38 No. 8. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English (1977): 843-859.
- ¹² The Pancasila Youth is a 3 million Member Paramilitary Group that supports the current government and is lead by "Gangsters" and other government officials. Notably, this group, though wearing military issue camouflage, wear bright orange highly visible fatigues. These easily recognized and easily visible uniforms, I would argue, are symbolic of the open acknowledgement of control and power wielded by the members and leaders of the Pancasila Youth.
- ¹⁴ Joshua Oppenheimer, Telephone Interview by Aruna Ekanayake, 08 Feb 2014.
- ¹⁵ This talk show was on Indonesian National Television as a "Special Dialogue" airing on *Dialoge Khusus, TVRI*. (Excerpt from "The Act of Killing")
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Marquis, "In Individualist, Just Like the Rest of Us: The Performance of Hegemonic Masculinities in "The Case of Milo Radulovich," *Journal of Film and Video* 66 No. 1 (2014): 39-51.
- ¹⁷ Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, "Show of Foirce: A Cinema-Seance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt," *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York & Chichester, West Sussex: Wallflower Press and Columbia University Press, 2012) 299.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003).
- ²¹ Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, "Show of Foirce: A Cinema-Seance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt," *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York & Chichester, West Sussex: Wallflower Press and Columbia University Press, 2012) 300.

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- ²² Mette Bjerregaard, "What Indonesians really think about The Act of Killing," *The Guardian*. Pancasila News and Media Limited, 05 Mar 2014.
<<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/05/act-of-killing-screening-in-indonesia>>.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Errol Morris, *The Thin Blue Line*, directed by Errol Morris, (1988; Miramax Films, 1988), Film.
- ²⁷ "The *Thin Blue Line* is the true story of the arrest and conviction of Randall Adams for the murder of a Dallas policeman in 1976. Billed as the first film to solve a murder, which influenced the overturn of the death sentence of Randall Dale Adams, who was accused and convicted of the murder of Dallas Police office Robert Wood.
- ²⁸ "The War Department." *Chicago Daily Tribune* [Chicago] 9 July 1876, 2. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.
- ²⁹ "Casualties in Iraq." *Anti-war.com*. Anti-war.com, 10 Mar 2014. Web. 11 Mar 2014.
- ³⁰ "Iraq Body Count." Iraq Body Count. Accessed February 28, 2017.
<https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>.
- ³¹ In *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* Maggie Nelson's discusses Abu Ghraib and that her "response to the pictures had more in common with that of Angela Davis, who saw in the as a reiteration of the tragic but familiar historical fact that 'people in power'" have "equal opportunity to inflict" all imaginable sorts of "violence on others." (Nelson 69)
- ³² Barrak Obama, "Osama bin Laden Dead." *National Address*, The White House: Washington D.C., 01 May 2011. Web. 11 Mar 2014.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ "Tribunal: Indonesia guilty of 1965 genocide." CNN. July 21, 2016. Accessed February 28, 2017.
- ³⁵ James, Reston, "Washington: A Gleam of Light in Asia," *New York Times* (New York, NY) 174. Jun 19 1966. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2014 .
- ³⁶ Reston, James. "Washington: A Gleam of Light in Asia." *New York Times* Jun 19 1966. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2014 .

- ³⁷ Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, Anonymous, and Signe Byrge Sorensen, "The Act of Killing - Press Notes," *The Act of Killing*, Draft House Films, 10 Mar 2014. Web. 11 Mar 2014. <drafthousefilms.com>.

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