# 'Obama's My Dad': Mixed Race Suspects, Political Anxiety and the New Imperialism

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All my life I have encountered suspicion about my race. As a child in a working class neighbourhood of Toronto, Canada in the 1970s, my mixed race identity seemed to be an ontological threat to my European immigrant and white settler neighbours, and my 'Mediterranean' appearance rendered me unintelligible in relation to Blackness.[1] As a pre-teen transplanted to Muscat, Oman in the 1980s, I was intelligible as Arab, which, given Oman's historical and geographical proximity to Eastern Africa, did not preclude African ancestry. While I was unremarkable at the national school, I was questioned by British 'expats' when I circulated in the international neighbourhood, despite (or perhaps because of) the presence of several mixed families.[2] Back in Toronto during the aggressive intensification of war and occupation in the Middle East in the 2000s, my racial ambiguity has become suspicious in new ways. I am dating this shift from September 2000, the beginning of the second Intifada, not September 2001, when the New American Century went prime time. Much happened between the two Septembers—mass protests at the summit on the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas at Québec City in April 2001; the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in August 2001. In the weeks following Durban, the global struggle to maintain white supremacy was recast as the will to reestablish American political supremacy. It was also during this time that, as an antiwar and anti-occupation organizer, my racial ambiguity was reconstituted through suspicions over whether I harbour dangerous worldviews.

Histories of anxiety around mixed raced identity feature nationalist postcolonial responses to European-descended subjects who have been constructed—and who sometimes construct themselves—as intermediaries of colonial and neocolonial power.[3] Mixed race subjects also emerge variously as a threat or an opportunity to settler colonial nation-building projects which have relied on a range of strategies to differentiate Indigenous, African-descended, immigrant, and white as discrete categories.[4] The evolving race anxieties of the American empire, however, comprise such a contradictory array of legal definitions of whiteness as to render the category ontologically meaningless;[5] yet, as Jasbir Puar aptly demonstrates, it is this imperialist assemblage of racialized

meanings which organizes the current transnational hegemony of security through the specter of the terrorist. Following Paul Gilroy's assertion that racism must be understood as being constitutive of race (not the other way around) and that racism must be understood in the historical context of empire (106; 148), I aim to consider ways in which race ideologies and racist practices have been reconstituted to focus on political consciousness. In this essay I apply Jasbir Puar's notions of 'assemblage' and 'affect' (127-134) as a method for excavating mixed race suspects; and engage Sarah Ahmed's 'phenomenology of whiteness' (158-162) in order to highlight the dimensions of racism that manifest as political suspicion. I argue that the current racial suspicion is not so much concerned about discovering whether we are really white as much as it is about discovering whether we aspire to imperialist bourgeois values.

Early antiracist critiques of multiculturalism as a recentering of whiteness, and as a diversion of antiracist politics have given way to an analysis of multiculturalism as a technology of neoliberal marketing and national rebranding. Jodi Melamed's essay on racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism historicizes the US context by sketching out the post World War Two pathologizing of radical antiracism, transnational Blackness and international socialism through the differentiation of 'good' and 'bad' African American political organizations and a reconfiguration of white privilege through "constituting the white liberal as the most felicitous member of the nation state..." (7). Melamed argues that this grafting of "an official antiracism to US nationalism" came about in a bid to bolster postwar US hegemony, and was sold to white Americans through rhetoric on the centrality of liberty and equality to international financial prosperity.[6] In the shift to multicultural neoliberalism, race as "economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinction" overlays and contradicts previous racial categories (14). In Canada, state policies of multiculturalism developed around notions of liberal inclusion in the 1970s have been reconstituted to signal neoliberal market competitiveness in the 1990s. We 'the multicultural' have come to signify cultural and linguistic competency, and transnational market opportunity.[7] The project of multiculturalism—once a federal strategy to mitigate antiracist organizing and the claims of racialized and immigrant communities on the state—is now premised on the notion that the 'multicultural' subject carries liberal capitalist values.[8]

Continuing her work with Amit Rai (2002; 2004) on the ways in which Sikh communities have been re-signified as

racialized/sexualized monster-terrorists through contemporary re-articulations of anti-Arab/Muslim racism (despite being neither Arab nor Muslim), Jasbir Puar argues that

> Terrorist look-alike bodies may allude to the illegible and incommensurable affect of queerness—bodies that are in some sense machined together, remarkable beyond identity, visuality, and visibility, to the realms of affect and ontology, the tactile and the sensorial… Beyond what the body looks like, then, this is also about what the queer body feels like, for the embodied and for the spectator. (132)

Through excavating the affective attributes ascribed to Sikh men, Puar develops the argument that analyzing *race as assemblage*, rather than as intersectional identity "enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies…interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects to each other" (122). Puar and Rai's attention to the transnational hybrid monster terrorist provides additional meaning to the debate over whether middle class minorities can be conceived of as white, and whether whiteness signifies 'fitness-within-capitalism' (Koshy, 180-193).[9] As I will ague below, the close encounter with mixed race hybridity afforded through attention to affect unsettles the tautology that "whiteness means what white people think it means" (Koshy, 173).

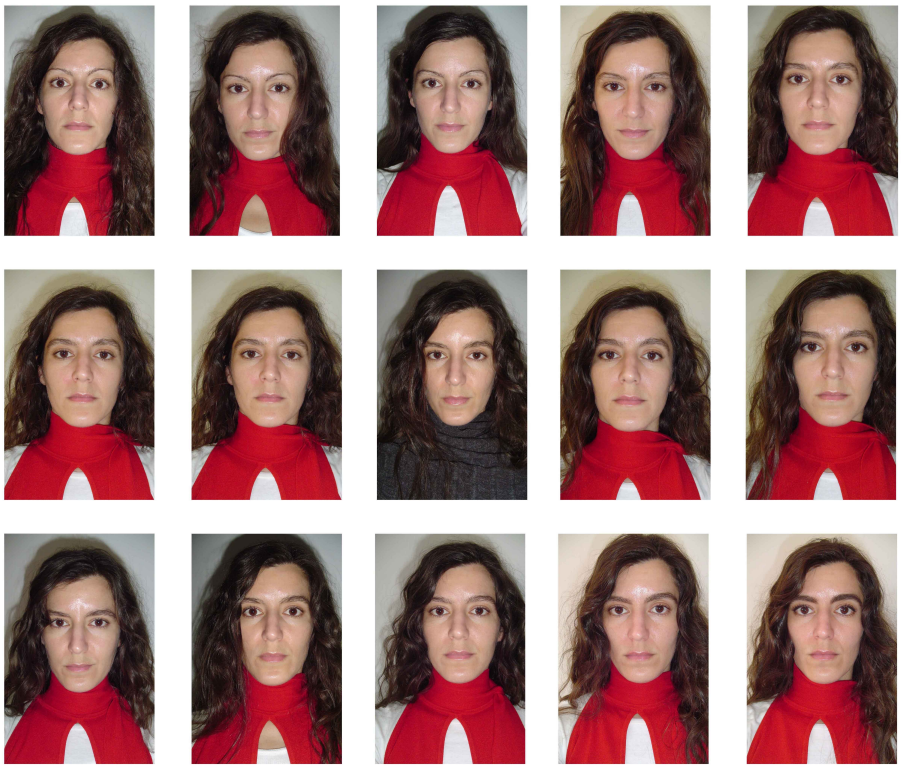

Image one, "My passport"
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In 2007, I presented a performance and installation in which I invited the audience to speculate on techniques of political and racial surveillance.[10] During the performance, I unpacked a suitcase into plastic airport security bins and filled out a declaration form for each item I unpacked. Items included partisan texts, photographs (see images three and four "Friday…" & "Wish you were here…"), newspaper clippings, hair smoothing products, and eyebrow tweezers. On a whiteboard I sketched out a crime-scene time-line detailing my political work, times I had been questioned about my racial background, and a 1968 photo of my father with clues about his political activity (see the man on the left in image two "Manual Obama"). Audience members were invited to don vinyl gloves and investigate the items in the plastic bins, and write their conclusions on the white board. On one of the gallery walls was a Canadian flag composed of small zip-lock bags reminiscent of airport security paraphernalia which had been stitched to the white fabric in rows and columns. Inside the bags were passport-style photos from a series of self-portraits taken as my eyebrows grew in from thin tweezed lines (see image one "My passport"). I was dressed in

exaggerated trappings of Canadiana—red cowboy boots, an off-white ruffled skirt, a red raincoat—and as I filled each security bin I pushed it outward to form an inverse Canadian flag, with the bins forming white bars on each side, and the suspect figure in the middle where the maple leaf would be. A white-identified friend who saw the work told me that night he had a dream in which it turned out that that no one was really white.

In her essay "A phenomenology of whiteness," Sarah Ahmed expands Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to talk about whiteness and 'passing' as an embodied and active ways of being in the world. In Ahmed's theorization "...even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness, if they are to get 'in'" (158). Ahmed conceptualizes this 'inhabiting' as a physical act, noting that "White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape" (158). On passing, Ahmed argues that "Becoming white... is closely related to the vertical promise of class mobility: you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body" (160). As Bourdieu developed his notion of habitus in order to excavate the differential embodiment of bourgeois and working class culture in France, Ahmed's habitus signals the importance of class *as it is lived* to the definition of whiteness; however, in order to develop the concept, we must recognize it as historically contingent. For example, Ahmed refers to Fanon's nausea in the famous passage from *Black Skin, White Masks*, explaining it as a sense of loss of something (whiteness) that he never had. I would argue that a sense of 'whiteness'—in Fanon's case a sense of being 'French,' of belonging to the culture of the metropole, of being a citizen of France—is something that Fanon *did* have, which is why he describes this episode in Paris as a psychic rupture.[11] Echoing Fanon's description of being hailed as a black man in the streets of Paris, Ahmed describes being stopped at the airport because of her name. "Having the 'right' passport does not make a difference when you have the wrong body or name..." (162).

More needs to be said about how those of us who have the 'wrong body or name' are then sorted—at the end of Ahmed's anecdote, she does indeed 'pass' through and continue on her travels. There is a hint about the political content of passing in her narration of being reassured by a sympathetic (brown) guard who tells her not to worry, that his uncle has been stopped too, and that she'll be cleared momentarily. Is there an aspect of passing that requires us to espouse particular political beliefs? Is there a liberal habitus? Fanon's 1952 passage describes the moment of being hailed as black as a moment in which his citizenship is torn away. Fanon was

a citizen insofar as French imperial policy/ideology considered subjects of French colonies to be French through cultural affiliation. As a Martinican with a French education, Fanon had reason to feel he was a citizen on his arrival in Paris—yet this citizenship, once stripped away, is not returned to him while he remains in France, despite his status as a doctor. Drawing on Fanon's analysis of postcolonial national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth* to develop his concept of a hybrid 'Third Space,' Homi Bhabha notes "For Fanon, the liberatory 'people' who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity" (157). Bhabha's hybrid identity is a postcolonial identity—following Puar and Rai's analysis of the monster-terrorist, perhaps we can conceptualize the hybrid as the one who *does not* pass. In contrast, Ahmed's 2007 passage describes a moment when her citizenship is momentarily torn away, and then restored when her bourgeois habitus is restored.

Image two "Manuel Obama"
© Author, 2009

I was teaching a course in postcolonial studies at the University of Toronto during the lead up to the US presidential election in fall 2008. After a lack-luster Canadian election in which our right-wing government with white supremacist roots was returned to power, my students were eager to discuss the pending Obama presidency.[12] Much of their enthusiasm focused on the potential for change in US foreign policy, and as Obama revealed his platform on

Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, they speculated that he would shift away from war and toward diplomacy if he were elected. As I watched the elections with a euphoric crowd at a popular downtown bar, a mixed race friend who also has a white mother and black father quipped "it's a mulatto revolution!" As the results rolled in, we watched flustered Republican talking heads declare that Obama was living proof that the US had overcome the legacy of racism. Indeed, throughout the campaign, Obama was frequently referred to as a living symbol of the unity of black and white America—he promoted this idea himself through his frequent references to his white maternal grandparents. Minelle Mahtani notes that mixed race people are often looked to as cultural ambassadors; however, the focus on his mixed race identity as ontology proved to be an effective way to avoid a focus on race as culture—his Muslim middle name, his African-ness. In her critique of cultural essentialism, Uma Narayan has argued that racism takes on both cultural and biological ideological forms, and that white feminisms fall into the trap of one while trying to refute the other.

Fanon recognized this vacillation between ontological and cultural ideological bases for racism, and the futility of pursuing either side of the dichotomy in order to refute racism. After noting his existential response to being 'hailed' or 'stopped' as a black man in the streets of Paris, he turns to an analysis of what the racism *did* in imperialist France, by asking questions about the distinction between anti-Black and anti-Arab racism in the metropole, and by analyzing the role of the imaginary African in the French imperialist project. A phenomenology of race is useful to continue to dispel the illusions of white supremacists who argue that Obama's presidency means we are living in a post-racist world. Indeed, there are many questions to be asked about how mixed race people are emerging as tropes of the triumph of a liberal brand of diversity—as Kimberley DaCosta argues, the identity 'multiracial' emerged in the US context in part through a struggle over racial categories on government forms, and in part through niche market recognition. In order to resist the tendency to analytically collapse antiracism into advocacy for market inclusion, we need a phenomenology of race that allows us to grasp both ontology and culture in relation to political consciousness. In *A Dying Colonialism* Fanon himself revealed how political consciousness is historically constituted *through* culture in his study of the evolution and significance of "Voice of Algeria" radio in the anti-colonial struggle. In a contemporary analysis, Haifa Zangana's *City of Widows* details the evolution of the role of Iraqi civil society in the resistance to the US occupation.


Image three "Friday afternoons at the Israeli consulate"
© Author, 2007

In the summer of 2005 I was stopped by Israeli border officials on my way from Jordan to the West Bank. My travelling companions passed through without a problem, despite the declaration of an Iranian birthplace on their Canadian passports. I was eventually allowed to pass, on a 30-day visa instead of the standard 90-day visa. Perhaps I was allowed to pass because of my Jewish-sounding name, perhaps because we had provided letters inviting us to a seminar at Bethlehem University. While I don't know why I was allowed to pass, I do know why I was stopped. When the border official scanned my passport, something came up on his computer screen—pictures, a file. The official called other officials. They spent a long time staring at me and back at the screen, comparing. They told me to sit and wait while they took my passport into an office. I knew what they were looking at on the screen. Since September 2000, I participated in, and eventually was an organizer of, weekly vigils at the Israeli consulate in Toronto. I had spoken on public panels and in the media as a member of the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation. The Israeli officials were not responding to my racial ambiguity, but to my Jewishness—specifically to my anti-Zionist Jewishness. Considering this 'hailing'

or 'stopping' of me *as a Jew* in the context of Israel's raison d'être as a state for all Jews reveals that a specific consciousness coheres to the ontology of Jewishness—one that aligns with colonial nationalism and US imperialism. If we only respond to the sorting of racialized bodies into extremist and liberal, we miss an opportunity to grasp how the political imaginaries of race are capitalist.


Image four "Wish you were here—Havana 2003"
© Author, 2003

My father Manuel, a man of Portuguese and Angolan descent, was an anti-fascist, anti-colonial organizer in Lisbon, the metropole of the Portuguese empire. He, like many other organizers during the revolutionary period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, was a communist.[13] Although he had a white Portuguese mother and a black Angolan father, he was not held up as a symbol of Portugal's triumph over a legacy of colonization and slavery. Once the post-fascist liberal state was consolidated, the role of communists and anti-colonial Africans in the Portuguese revolution, and the role of anti-colonial struggles in ending Portuguese colonialism, were left out of mainstream Portuguese historiography. Himani Bannerji (1995) argues that we need to use an analysis of lived experience as an entry point to an analysis of social relations; however, this phenomenological entry point is nothing if it is not a way to ground, specify, and historicizes global relations of power, for when we

collapse epistemology into ontology, we erase social movements and political subjects. As Chandra Mohanty argues, without a method of analysis that allows us to link the local, specific, and contingent to the reality of global capitalist imperialism, transnational feminist solidarity is impossible. A phenomenology of race without an analysis of political consciousness erases histories of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles, especially indigenous feminist movements.[14]

It's true—as someone in a racially ambiguous position, as someone who does not 'inhabit spaces that extend my shape,' I admit to feeling an ephemeral comfort in looking at the face of a president who looks like my father. The morning after the election, I woke to the reality of an expanded war in Afghanistan and an intensification of labour apartheid in the US and Canada.[15] The latest concentration of class power through ever-expanding corporate subsidy has only increased the regulatory aspects of neoliberalism—specifically, the ways in which states, whether through ideological hegemony, political takeover by capitalist elites, or IMF/World Bank imposition, have de-regulated and re-regulated human rights, education, health care, physical infrastructure, and labour.[16] The election that resulted in my greater sense of ontological ease has done nothing to change the face of neoliberalism, as a totalizing regime of perpetual war, resource theft, and environmental devastation. A political phenomenology of race recognizes that Latin American social movements and socialist parties have been organizing internationally against neoliberalism since the founding of the São Paulo Forum in 1990, around the same time that activists in Africa and the Caribbean began organizing against World Bank and IMF mandated 'structural adjustment.' A political phenomenology of race recognizes the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution which has resisted US imperialism long enough to see the emergence of anti-neoliberal socialist and social democrat governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

We must move beyond querying the obvious and egregious violations of citizenship rights through racial profiling, illegal rendering, and state torture, and conceptualize the contradiction between liberal citizenship and relational, enacted citizenship. It is indisputable, for example, that the Canadian citizenship rights of Maher Arar and Omar Khadr have been violated; it is indisputable that these violations were enacted, in part, through racist state mechanisms and procedures.[17] It is not a question of expanding liberal citizenship to include non-white habitus; rather, we must

analyze liberal citizenship as an aspect of the global system of nation states through which the capitalist system functions, even as we demand protections afforded by the extension of citizenship rights to those who Achille Mbembe describes as being 'marked for death' in the global apartheid system.[18] For example, in their anti-capitalist struggle with the Mexican government the Zapatistas have adopted a strategic relational approach to formal equality through their use of legal defense committees (Speed 137-154). An analysis of race that conceptualizes in/equality through reference to bourgeois 'passing' cannot produce anti-racist politics, only neoliberal politics. This kind of an analysis continues to highlight the transnational elite—those who, in the Obama era, we might hazard to recognize as the global bourgeoisie—while obscuring global apartheid. My father was an anti-colonial, anti-fascist, socialist organizer. Ideologues of race in a liberal world do not see my father as a symbol of racial unity, healing the wounds of Portuguese imperialism and slavery in Africa—in fact, they do not see him at all.

## Notes

[1] Toronto-based author Dionne Brand's best-selling novel *What We All Long For* describes the appearance of her mixed race character Carla, who has a black father and white mother, this way: "...she might be Italian, southern" (7).

[2] In her study of mixed race identity in Britain, Suki Ali references the common question "Where do you come from?" which in my case is often articulated as "What is your background, anyway?"

[3] On the class aspirations of postcolonial Anglo-Indians, see Alison Blunt, "'Land of Our Mothers': Home, Identity, and Nationality for Anglo-Indians in British India, 1919-1947" *History Workshop Journal* 54/Autumn (2002): 49-72; on the UNITA party's violent rhetoric against urban Creole, assimilado, and mestiço Angolans, see David Birmingham, "Angola" in Patrick Chabal et al. *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002) 137-184; on the role of the mixed race administrative class in developing anti-colonial consciousness in the Dutch East Indies, see Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[4] On the white identification of African-descended rural communities in Brazil, see France Winddance Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 1998:2005); on the spatial collapse of whiteness and non-Aboriginal identity in Australia, see Wendy Shaw Shaw, "Decolonizing Geographies of Whiteness." *Antipode* 38/4 (2006): 851-869.

[5] See Susan Koshy (2001) for a review of the evolving legal categorization of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hawaiian, and Indian Americans from 1790 to 2000.

[6] Arguments that racism is bad for the US' international image are echoed by contemporary Ashkenazi anti-occupation concerns that the occupation of Palestine is bad for the Israeli psyche, or white antiwar arguments that American/Canadian/British invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq fuel terrorism —the rhetorical implication of these arguments is that military imperialism should end if it's bad for white people.

[7] For a history of the neoliberalization of multicultural policy in Canada, see Yasmeen Abu Laban & Christina Gabriel, *Selling Diversity: Immigration, Multiculturalism, Employment Equity, and Globalization* (Peterborough, ON; New York; Sydney; Ormskirk, UK: Broadview Press, 2002).

[8] For a discussion of the demobilizing effect of multicultural policy on anti-racist organizing in Canada, see Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2000).

[9] For a simultaneous analysis of Canadian post 9-11 media representations, revealing the bifurcation of Muslims into irrational, inscrutable, orientalized fundamentalists; and rational, liberal, 'western' citizens, see Yasmin Jiwani, "Orientalizing 'War Talk': Representations of the Gendered Muslim Body Post 9/11 in 'The Montreal Gazette,'" in Jo-Anne Lee & John Lutz eds. *Situating 'Race' and Racisms in Space, Time, and Theory: Critical Essays for Activists and Scholars* (Montreal, Kingston, London & Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005) 178-203.

[10] Curated by Nahed Mansour and performed at the Toronto Free Gallery on March 2, 2007.

[11] For an elaboration of the intellectual, political, and cultural terrain on which Fanon developed his intervention on racial nausea, see David Macey, Frantz Fanon: A Life (London: Granta Books, 2000).

[12] The current Conservative Party is the product of a merger between the faltering, historically powerful Progressive Conservative Party, and Canadian Alliance, which emerged out of the right-wing Reform Party. The Reform Party was formed in Western Canada in the 1980s, and rapidly gained support with its anti-immigration, anti-multicultural, anti-bilingual agenda. The original party formation had ties to organized white supremacist groups.

[13] For a history of the communist roots and dimensions of the Portuguese revolutionary period, which was ultimately transformed into a liberal capitalist coup d'état by army officers, and is recalled in mainstream historiography as the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, see John Hammond, Building Popular Power: Workers' and Neighborhood

Movements in the Portuguese Revolution (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988).

[14] For a formulation of the Maori woman-land dyad as a politicized mode of being/knowing, see Makere Stewart-Harawira, "Practising Individual Feminism: Resistance to Imperialism," in Joyce Green ed. *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Blackpoint, NS & London: Fernwood Publishing & Zed Books, 2007).

[15] For example, for a discussion of H1-B visas and the precarious outsider status South Asian IT workers in the US, see Payal Bannerji, "Flexible Hiring, Immigration and Indian IT Workers Experiences of Contract Work in the United States," in Marjorie DeVault, ed. *People at Work: Life, Power and Social Inclusion in the New Economy* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2008) 97-111. For a critique of the impact of Canada's federal Live-in Caregiver Program on Filipina and Caribbean workers, see Daiva Stasiulis & Abigail Bakan, *Negotiating Citizenship: Migrant Women in Canada and the Global System* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

[16] For accessible histories of these contemporary phenomena, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).

[17] Maher Arar is a Canadian citizen who was apprehended by US authorities and illegally rendered to Syria, where he was imprisoned and tortured for ten months. A high-profile public inquiry revealed the Canadian government's collusion with the illegal rendition. Omar Khadr, also a Canadian citizen, was apprehended in Afghanistan as a legal minor at 15 years of age, and has been imprisoned since 2002 as the youngest prisoner at Guantanamo. The Canadian government continually refused to extradite him, and by 2009 he was the only remaining 'western' national imprisoned at Guantanamo. In November 2010 he was sentenced to 40 years for war crimes after being coerced into pleading guilty to killing one US soldier during the invasion of Afghanistan.

[18] For an analysis of the centrality of nation states to the functioning of capitalist imperialism, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London & New York: Verso, 2005).

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