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The U.S. American left and reverse moral exceptionalism: when do villains become heroes?

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ABSTRACT

This article takes the assassination of Qasem Soleimani as a case study that manifests the schism between the realities of those in revolutionary struggle and those on the U.S. American left who might gather in solidarity with them. I explicate “reverse moral exceptionalism” as a nationalistic tendency to insist on oneself as central to every event of significance on the world stage and which positions the United States (U.S.) as a singular source of evil in the world. Based on an ethnocentrism that approaches the world from a position of dominance, reverse moral exceptionalism saturates the space available for others and induces the inability to listen to the testimony of others. Cartesian “either-or” logics situate all non-white state actors as inherently colonized and by extension, all colonial brown actors emerge as apolitical victims. I argue that when whiteness is only understood in racially provincial terms, it distorts understandings of inter-racial collusion in the transnational context. I attend to the unlikely ways in which whiteness and its concomitant forms of exceptionalism permeate U.S. American nationalist subjectivities, setting the groundwork for an anti-colonial discourse that paradoxically justifies oppressive regimes and brings about indifference to grassroots revolutionary discourse and the micropolitics of resistance.

KEYWORDS

American moral exceptionalism; American left; decoloniality; moral exceptionalism; whiteness

In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

In the early hours of January 3, 2020, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Quds Force, the external operations branch of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was killed by a targeted United States (U.S.) drone strike in Baghdad, Iraq. His death was confirmed when pictures of his severed arm with its signature amulet ring on his *digitus medicinalis* were made public. In the aftermath of the strike, Twitter exploded with the hashtag #WorldWarIII, concerned that Donald Trump’s actions would cause such a world war. Activist debates raged about the legality of the strike, how it might play into the 2020 presidential campaign, what this intervention would mean for their long-held stance against U.S. American imperialism, and potential consequences for the Iran–U.S. relationship.¹ By the next day, anti-war protests broke out in over seventy cities across the U.S., with protestors holding Iranian flags in

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solidarity.² When Iran retaliated by attacking two U.S. American military bases, there was a sigh of relief that no U.S. Americans were killed, after which attention to the incident subsequently died down.³

While the “American left” was in a frenzy of skepticism regarding the killing of Soleimani, Syrians, Iraqis, and Iranians celebrated his death.⁴ Iranians in the impoverished Sistan and Baluchistan Province celebrated with pizza, congratulating mothers who lost their children at his hands with the hashtag #FreeIran2020. Iraqis rejoiced, taking to the streets in jubilation to celebrate the death of a figure who had just two months prior been responsible for a deadly crackdown on protestors incensed about corruption and foreign Iranian influence.⁵ In Idlib, Syrians passed out sweets to celebrate his death. Syrians were less influenced by the “Trump effect” (i.e., bias due to popular notions of Trump’s tendency toward impulsiveness and rash decision making) as the U.S. American left, and less likely to place the U.S. as the center of analysis.⁶ These grassroots expressions were not naive to the fact that President Trump had not acted in their defense, but that for a cataclysmic moment, U.S. American interests had coincided with theirs and justice was served.

Regardless of the reasons behind Trump’s actions and the legality of his behavior, Syrians were incensed at the lack of solidarity, even if only rhetorical, with the actual victims of Soleimani’s repression by a left seen as their likeliest and potentially strongest allies. To some, this marked a blind spot, a collective myopia unable to listen to the tragedy and ironies of conditional solidarity with brown bodies in the region. In this article, I develop the term “reverse moral exceptionalism” to describe a contemporary nationalistic tendency to vigilantly insist on oneself as behind every event of significance on the world stage. Although dedicated to a critique of the imperialism of one’s nation state, reverse moral exceptionalism exhibits a white western tendency to maintain dominance and unintentionally saturate the space available for the testimony of others. The assassination of Soleimani is selected not as a source of inspiration for this article, but rather for its manifestation of the detachment between the ontological and epistemological realities of the revolutionary subject and those who might gather in solidarity. This investigation is taken with the explicit intention of underscoring the exigency for privileging the revolutionary subject as the principal locus of suasive conception.

Indeed, after Soleimani’s assassination, Syrians watched the U.S. American left’s sudden apprehension over the region, as if they were not already engulfed in a raging conflict in which an excess of 600,000 Syrian lives had been lost, one of the deadliest genocides of the century.⁷ Their hesitancy of Syrians to jump on the World War III bandwagon was guided by their intimate awareness of the scale of Soleimani’s atrocities in the region and his sectarian cleansing of their villages and cities.⁸ Soleimani was involved in starvation sieges on the rebel-held cities of Madaya and Zabadani,⁹ enhanced the Assad regime’s chemical weapons capabilities, and waged brutal assault on Syrians for over eight years.¹⁰ For Syrians, Soleimani was not just an Iranian general, but a figure who haunted their existence. As a strong supporter of the Assad regime, he had become an influential presence in the country. Riad Farid Hijab, the former Prime Minister of Syria, stated after his defection that “Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al Assad, but Qasem Soleimani.”¹¹

The inability to contemplate the consequences of Soleimani’s life or to engage in a nuanced critique of the assassination was an erasure of suffering at Soleimani’s

hands.¹² Those who suffer feel immense pain when sites of repair are neglected by those who might stand in solidarity with them, often experiencing as much:

rage, resentment, indignation, or humiliation in response to the failure of other people and institutions to come to their aid, acknowledge their injury ... place blame appropriately on wrongdoers, and offer some forms of solace, safety and relief as victims experience toward the original wrongdoer.¹³

As such, this article is not written to make judgment on the appropriateness of U.S. actions or to prioritize a western perspective on the “East,” but rather to explore the schism that exists between the rhetorics of the U.S. American left and grassroots revolutionaries outside of the U.S. borders. Admittedly, this is a challenging topic considering Trump’s exclusionary discourses, in which he directly appealed to voters’ racial and ethnic prejudices against Arabs, Muslims, Latina/o/x/es, and a host of “others” during his presidential election and subsequent time in office,¹⁴ and of course, the reality of the U.S. as an imperial actor (in terms of its economic, military, and cultural presence) in various countries across the globe.

The time is ripe to address the asymptotic nature of the discourse in which points of principle and points of articulation never meet. In what follows, I theorize reverse moral exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology culminating in a hermetic sealing indifferent to the grassroots revolutionary subject. I overview literature in the field on how whiteness operates within U.S. American nationalist subjectivities. I then detail the discourses of revolutionary subjects on the occasion of Soleimani’s assassination. Here, I foreground the Syrian revolutionary subject as a primary source of rhetorical texts. This provides a frame of reference through which reverse moral exceptionalism may be deciphered in the reaction of the U.S. American left. It is intended to be situated against, read alongside, and juxtaposed with, a cross-section of the U.S. American left’s discourses on the assassination. Drawing these together, I reflect on the limits and absences that occur when revolutionary subjects are not centered to theorize reverse moral exceptionalism.

Reverse moral exceptionalism

In what follows, I explicate the key term “reverse moral exceptionalism” as a nationalistic ideology, which reflects a tendency to place oneself as the cause of every world event of significance. Although dedicated to a critique of the imperialism of one’s nation state, reverse moral exceptionalism exhibits a white western proclivity to establish dominance and saturate the space available for the testimony of those outside the nation state. I argue reverse moral exceptionalism induces an inability to listen to the testimony of what others have suffered on their own terms. For those whose lives have been destroyed, this forms a “second harm” or bystander complicity compounding the original violation—an instance when “failure to hear abounds.”¹⁵ Indeed, Syrians have exerted significant efforts to instigate trans-linguistic and transnational affective encounters across borders in response to “waning attention” to the Syrian cause.¹⁶ As such, I argue for the need to listen to their testimony and attend to their social movement as a terrain of meaning, not necessarily to “save them” but to counteract the ways in which they have been erased and viewed with suspicion. I select the U.S. American left as a case study of the peculiar manner in which “just-minded people” are oblivious

to the devastation of those in liberatory struggle. Though formulated from the particulars of this case, the analysis demonstrates a broader phenomenon of the “gentle back-door cruelties of ‘nice people’” who are unable to act as containers for the pain of others.¹⁷

Although modernist-leftist policies are generally viewed as creating less inimical conditions for liberatory social movements than neoliberal right-wing regimes, Syrian revolutionaries have long been critical of “the Left, writ large.”¹⁸ Despite attentiveness to local oppressions related to prison reform, women’s rights, racial justice, and healthcare, the U.S. American left has not attained an equivalently progressive stance with transnational subjects. This “progressive dystopia” has been attended to in various settings,¹⁹ but in the context of Syria, is due to a myriad of factors that stymie a recognition of the emancipatory qualities of this revolutionary struggle.²⁰ For one, their stance has been characterized by a narrow anti-imperialism, orientaling tendencies, reactionary thinking, and shackled conceptions of revolution.²¹ Western scholars and critics are “guardians of a hegemonic political order,” which has meant that Syrian revolutionaries are in the throes of a “competing war of narratives” as to what happened in their country.²² For one, Syrian revolutionaries are denied legitimacy for not knowing how to deploy their political ideologies within notions of “civil” discourse as utopian “secular” revolutionaries.²³ The expectation of cultural assimilation is a tactic of imperial domination, which makes terroristic the very forms of political dissent that such revolutions seek to displace. In this respect, the performativity of the “bourgeois” Baath party of Assad, within a politics of whiteness and hyper-secularism, eases the white-washing of the crimes of Assad and his allies against Syrians.²⁴ Parochial conceptions of innate and deeply rooted sectarian strife in the region dominate perceptions of the revolution.²⁵ The continuous positioning of the revolution within a deficit as compared with western liberal democratic norms differentiates the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot.²⁶ In this article, I highlight another dimension that interferes with the ability to listen with humility to radical subjectivities. I suggest reverse moral exceptionalism is the normative interpretive framework through which revolutionary subjects are intelligible, one that errs too much on a critique of the self (or one’s nation) and the super- iconicity of the U.S. as a rogue imperial actor on the world stage.

Attending to the singular dimensions of the Syrian revolution entails a rejection of the “universal,” which has been complicit in the erasure of Others.²⁷ In this vein, I probe the unexpected form in which mythic narratives of exceptionalism persist in encounters with transnational others. The case of Soleimani’s assassination provides insight into how exceptionalism inculcates deafness to revolutionary discourse, such that even those with “progressive” positions domestically are not able to exit the “generalized callousness” toward the extinguishing of transnational lives.²⁸ Ultimately, reverse moral exceptionalism relies on notions of exceptionalism, which remain loyal to visions of U.S. American greatness, while reinforcing existing values that prevent the revelation of new truths.

Traditionally, U.S. American moral exceptionalism ties into the conviction that the U.S. is the greatest country in the world. In other words, the U.S. or “America” is not only unlike any other nation but is an exemplary nation with a superior role to play in history. In this calculus, the U.S. is a beacon of light for the world. This ideology is so ingrained in U.S. American national identity that it is “a natural part of the language.”²⁹ Though U.S. American moral exceptionalism is ubiquitous in political discourse, it

predominantly revolves around the morality of U.S. military actions and foreign interventions. However, it is hardly monolithic in character. There are a multitude of U.S. American exceptionalisms, each “sufficiently distinct to justify further study.”³⁰ As such, this article attends to moral exceptionalism in progressive discourse as an important dimension yet to be addressed. Given that moral exceptionalism is commonly associated with conservative and centrist (i.e., liberal) groups, it tends to operate invisibly and without recognition in progressive spaces. As a rhetorical invention, reverse moral exceptionalism provides context for understanding how Others are erased within the discourse of the U.S. American left.

In line with calls to interrogate and resist invisible ideologies of whiteness in the U.S.,³¹ I argue reverse moral exceptionalism is often conditioned by race, specifically as an underlying logic of whiteness. Here, reverse moral exceptionalism is attached to structures of whiteness and geospatial articulations of power,³² rather than an intrinsic characteristic of white bodies. In this sense, whiteness is national, and at times international in scope, rather than just at the level of white embodiment.³³ In essence, those aware of their white privilege and who disavow racism are inculcated within ideological systems that set the groundwork for an anti-colonial discourse, which paradoxically justifies oppressive regimes and oppressive actors. Whiteness and its concomitant forms of exceptionalism shape how western subjects respond to perceived crisis abroad.³⁴ Norms of whiteness produce U.S. subjects who center their own identities and histories of colonial conquest,³⁵ even when motivated by ideals of justice and anti-racism, as opposed to a more racially nuanced understanding of events on the ground, which center grievable subjects. U.S. American nationalist subjectivities “internalize the colonial relation” even when attempting to “repress this interiorized colonialism.”³⁶ As such, this analysis illustrates the erasure of others, which occurs when the exceptional evil of the U.S. is conjured to assuage white guilt and redeem oneself. And so, I reflect on the persistence of racial oppression in the unexpected material and discursive ways in which whiteness perpetuates disparity and violence.³⁷ Intervening against whiteness in the discourse of the U.S. American left means addressing the limits of a racially provincial whiteness discourse of “white is bad, brown/Black is good.” Through not attributing agency to brown and Black bodies, reverse moral exceptionalism posits other colonizers as victims and distorts understandings of inter-racial collusion in transnational contexts.

As a point of departure, reverse moral exceptionalism challenges notions of a singular “moral exceptionalism,” which unilaterally maps the U.S. as an unrivaled humanitarian actor. Though the term may appear nonsensical, in the marrying of the terms “reverse” and “moral exceptionalism” is a tension productive to deciphering how the revolutionary subject is constituted under such ideologies. Moral exceptionalism and reverse moral exceptionalism are two sides of the same coin in that they both are based on an ethnocentrism, which approaches the world from a position of dominance. Similar to moral exceptionalism, reverse moral exceptionalism is a nationalistic tendency to vigilantly insist on oneself as behind every event of global significance. However, while moral exceptionalism is predicated on self-admiration, reverse moral exceptionalism is predicated on self-flagellation. It is dedicated to a critique of the imperialism of one’s nation state but unintentionally saturates the space available for the testimony of others. Therefore, reverse moral exceptionalism is centered on a similar logic of exceptionalism but one which operates opposite to its intention. Self-flagellation, often thought of as

virtuous, is problematic when it leads to a blindness to the multi-sided truth of the malicious aspirations (and actions) of others. In its overdetermination of the banality of national evil, reverse moral exceptionalism places the U.S. as the only actor capable of making history in a zero-sum equation of evil in the world. As the egoistic nation is inserted universally as the object of analysis, an orientation toward other subjects is averted. Reverse moral exceptionalism therefore anchors the unwillingness to entertain risk, uncertainty, or something other than what we expect or want to hear. The revolutionary subject is discounted as unworthy of intellectual engagement or curiosity. In the inability to suspend one's nation from the equation, others are disembodied, the capacity for attentive listening obstructed, and openings for solidarity constrained.

Rhetoric of Syrian revolutionary subjects

In what follows, I examine the rhetoric of revolutionary subjects, including footage of the reaction to the assassination, social media posts, and coverage of the assassination in pro-revolution Syrian media outlets such as Enab Baladi, AlJumhuriya and Orient TV. The analysis identifies germinal themes, which reveal the ideational conscious and material practices on the occasion of Soleimani's assassination: first, grassroots euphoria and communal dance; second, agency reclamation in the face of oppression; and third, an argument for heterarchical colonization, that is, how multiple colonial power hierarchies are entangled with one another rather than in one singular colonial or capitalist world-system. Together, the alluring chants, spontaneous gaiety, dark satire, harrowing sorrows, and agentic vernaculars underscore the colossal incongruence between revolutionary subjectivities and that of the U.S. American left.

Affective joy and celebration

First, upon the news of Soleimani's assassination, symbolic and physical expressions of joy and conviviality ignites in public spaces. A carnivalesque mix of bodies fills alleyways and streets, replete with clapping, dancing, and drumming. In the hustle and bustle of the streets of Idlib, Atareb, and Suwaida, tray after tray of sweets are distributed with hearty congratulations on the news, with placards stating: "on the occasion of the death of Soleimani, from Syrian revolutionaries." Arms clamor over each other for a piece of baklava in a communal act of "breaking bread."³⁸ As a dish, baklava is "matched by no other ... the king of sweets" historically commemorating special occasions, be it the promotion of military people at guild ceremonies, milestones of life (birth, marriage, death), and political events such as military victories.³⁹ The Syrian revolution's flag is held high as revolutionary anthems roared from the speakers. A hanging banner metaleptically claims the assassination as rooted in the revolutionary struggle against despots and tyrants, with the words "the revolution goes on."⁴⁰ Such protests are easily indexed as "image events" on the political street,⁴¹ that is, revolutionary discourse against Soleimani's world-destroying violence and the atmospheric conditions, which marked the news of Soleimani's death.

A news report captures the buoyant construction of this moment. A man asks the camera: "I mean, a man who kills children, what do you expect our reaction will be? Aside from happiness and pleasure?"⁴² One man prays "God would attach the rope to the bucket," a local proverb, which sketches a rope tied to a bucket that has reached the

bottom of a proverbial well, conveying the hope that the next criminal in line would find a similar end. Another prays that “Hassan Zemmera” (i.e., Hassan the Horn) and Bashar al Assad would follow.⁴³ The activist and former detainee Hanadi Zahlout mirrors these sentiments in rhythmical Arabic, “if our eyes could see the spirits of cities, we would have seen this morning Aleppo in her glorious long dresses of silk dancing.”⁴⁴ Across these voices, the assassination is divine karma for an individual who had long acted with impunity.

Satiric subjectivities also inscribe the response to Soleimani’s death. Yakeen Yaser Bido, a prominent female journalist in Idlib and former Orient reporter, refers to President Trump as “Abu Ivanka al helweh,” that is, father of pretty Ivanka, as she appeals to him in an ingratiating tone to bring their cheer to its climax:

Sayra we sayra (“it is happening and it is happening,” i.e., you are already in the heat of the action). Continue your good deed with aircraft over Damascus ... complete our joy, as we have become strangers to something called joy!⁴⁵

In response, her friend, the Idlibi journalist Salwa Abdel Rahman, congratulates her, envious that they both missed out on the baklava:

They all ate sweets on the killing of Soleimani, but Yakeen and I did not ... ! And so, we decided to drink maté instead and to pour on the sugar. And, we are postponing our celebration. We said perhaps we wake up in the morning and sweeten ourselves with the news of the killing of the animal Bashar.⁴⁶

Ali Ferzat, the founder of al-Dumari (*The Lamplighter*) known for his anti-regime caricatures, which deploy humor to laugh at the absurdity of life under authoritarianism, also published several cartoons of the assassination. In one, a man kicks Soleimani to the skies, only to find Soleimani being kicked back down to earth by a foot, presumably God’s, looming from a cloud. Aside from the obvious politics of insult and black humor, the message is unapologetic: even the heavens do not want Soleimani.⁴⁷ A few days later after Soleimani was buried in his hometown of Kerman, Ferzat published another cartoon of President Trump urinating on the headstone of Soleimani’s grave.⁴⁸ In the comments, Ferzat writes, “I wish I could do the same, but sitting.”

The communal singing, dancing, drinking, eating, and sarcastic overtones reveling in Soleimani’s burial “below the land,” as emplaced rhetorical practices, all indicate the mobilization of Syrian revolutionary heritage and celebratory rituals on Soleimani’s death. These practices, once harshly curtailed by the state, also lay exclusive claim to the land.⁴⁹ After years of repression, the unrestrained congregation and expression within public spaces reject Soleimani’s ownership and plundering of their lands, while endorsing another message: *this land is ours*. In shared space of protest, radical subjectivities are impelled not only by the severing of people from their subsistence base and the expropriation of their lands, but by an ontological relation that draws divine ownership and leadership from the land.

Resistance and loss

Another prominent theme characterizing the Syrian response to Soleimani’s assassination is a rhetoric of invective against Soleimani and the reclamation of agency as victims laden with the emotional intensity of loss. In this performative space, revolutionary subjects testify to Soleimani’s gratuitous violence and war crimes. For instance,

internally displaced refugees in Idlib are interviewed in makeshift camps, channeling and amplifying the effect on actual bodies in crisis. With the brute physical reality of harm unmistakable, one man is laying down as the camera pans over metal implants protruding out of his injured leg.⁵⁰ The assassination triggers a carceral recalling of trauma and injustice as the man places his hand on his heart and grief furrows his face:

We didn't even know what was happening before a bomb fell on us. My wife died, my son's leg was cut off, and I was hit in both my legs. My brothers were both martyred. We had a lot of casualties. All of this is because of Qasem Soleimani. But, we would have wished that his killing would have been at the hands of our revolutionaries. At the hands of the opposition.

As the video unfolds, another man claims Soleimani's killing a "victory" for Syrians. Taking ownership of the assassination centers one's own revolutionary resistance to oppression and to Soleimani's structural violence against Syrians, rather than the intervention of the U.S.

Beyond massacres as episodic violence, Soleimani's use of starvation sieges as a military tactic and sectarian cleaning mechanism are recounted, such as the "starve or bow" sieges that wreaked famine and death in the Damascus suburbs of Ghouta and Yarmouk.⁵¹ This rhetoric aims to interpellate the addressee at the most basic level—the need for sustenance. In this context, the language of famine is not metaphoric, but an embodied expression of harm undergone. Foregrounding the emotional release triggered by the assassination, Joman Hasan, a Syrian activist and former detainee elucidates the cathartic moment in which she heard of Soleimani's assassination:

I heard the news of Soleimani's assassination at 1 am I got up, turned the lights on, and wept for all of the kids in Madaya who died of starvation. I wept for the siege of Yarmouk. I wept for the rubble of Aleppo.⁵²

Elsewhere, revolutionary subjects directly juxtapose the hyper-technification of legality within the rhetoric of the U.S. American left with their own discourses of legality, that is, the argument cut both ways. For example, one article brings attention to Soleimani's sanctioning by the UN and how his movements between Syria and Iraq were in violation of an international travel ban under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231.⁵³ In the same spirit, the acclaimed Syrian journalist Ahmad Aba Zayd likens Qasem Soleimani to a drug cartel, Daesh, or Nazi leader operating outside of the law:

[Soleimani acted] not as a state but as a gang ... the concept of assassination originated in the first place because states do not authorize the killing of leaders of other states ... he is a symbol of Iran's expansionist project ... This is the naked Iranian project, such as Nazism, Zionism and Assadism, just a project of extermination, the dissemination of killing.⁵⁴

Here, Soleimani was not a political statesman, but a man operating outside of international law. In a report on Orient TV, Syrians on the street describe Soleimani in harsh terms, without the filtering of allegory or illusion, as a "terrorist," "sectarian criminal," "militia man," "najes" (a religious reference to an impure being), and "child murderer."⁵⁵ Parallels between Osama bin Laden, perhaps the most infamous terrorist in recent history, and Qasem Soleimani are stressed: "[t]he terrorist actions of Soleimani far outweigh that of Al Qaeda and Daesh together. The crimes of Iran in Syria alone, are beyond the imagination in terms of the destruction, displacement."⁵⁶ Hence,

concomitant with the profound festivity in the streets is an invitation to consider the assassination as an overdue public reckoning for Soleimani's illegal actions in the region.

Moreover, Soleimani's absence offers restorative hope for relief from the suffocation of everyday life and an opening to imagine otherwise worlds. Activists such as Fared Al Hor and Mohamad Naser re-tweeted images of billboards and monuments of Soleimani in Lebanon wondering how one might make these spaces "livable and bearable, to both sides?"⁵⁷ In an analogous vein, the language of breathing and suffocation speaks to the clashing politics of justice and oppression in the persevering struggle for self-determination:

[w]hile his demise is not sufficient retribution—nor does it provide his victims justice—it has nonetheless offered a modicum of breathing space, even cheer, to the survivors of the hellfire, death, and devastation of which he was among the chief architects.⁵⁸

In connecting breathing to an attempt for justice, there is an ontological discernment of breathing as a fundamental human right, which Soleimani abused. The language of breathing advances material and symbolic meaning similar to "a breathing-centered conception of responsibility for justice" in the Black context in the U.S.⁵⁹ In his death, the capacity for breath, and for justice, however short lived, is created.

Heterarchical structures of colonization

Finally, revolutionary subjects lay the groundwork for the diversity of meanings attached to the workings of the "colonial." Speaking to the heterarchical structures of colonization, the multiple intricate linkages among a network of actors that enable colonization to occur are delineated. As the underlying workings of colonialism are unraveled, the multitude of macro-political, structural, and historical contexts, events, and circumstances that mark the colonial playing field are drawn.

Primarily, there is a precise argument for Soleimani as a colonial figure in his own right. One news report invites a consideration of Soleimani's legacy as a colonial figure through his "constant presence... on the ground" in Syria.⁶⁰ Soleimani is chronicled as strutting seamlessly about Indigenous Syrian lands/water/air. A spatial and temporal analysis of his movements meticulously enumerates the cities and dates in which he was present in Syria, including an archive of photographs of him in Daraa, Deir ez-Zour, Hama, and Aleppo. Perhaps the most pertinent is one of Soleimani assuredly strolling the streets of eastern Aleppo in the wake of the displacement of its people after a four-month siege by the regime and Iranian-backed militias. The photograph, which went viral among Syrians, has a re-traumatizing effect for those in exile: hundreds of thousands of Aleppans had either been killed or forcibly displaced from the city after four years and five months of battle before the city fell to government forces due in no small part to Iranian bombardment campaigns.⁶¹ Syrians dream of re-writing his death to avenge the violence he wrought on Indigenous lands: "I wish he had died in Aleppo or Deir ez-Zour, where he had desecrated its soil."⁶² In the same article, an opposition figure is quoted making the syntactical association of genocide with the act of walking on land: "he is a massacre walking on legs!" Inherited within this rhetoric is Soleimani as a colonialist who abused inhabited memories and not just the material geography of the land.

The idea of Soleimani as a colonial figure is also made through a contestation of the lionizing perception of him as an anti-imperial statesman faithful to the Palestinian cause. His anti-imperial cosmology in official discourse is argued to conceal the (ongoing) structures of colonial domination he produced in Syria. Osama Abu Zayd, a Syrian opposition spokesperson and former detainee, invites listeners to re-think the persona of Soleimani as an anti-imperial figure challenging the Israeli occupation:

If support [for Palestine] is the standard on which our values stand, then the Syrian people are ahead of Soleimani and his country. This people have offered solidarity to Palestinians, and this is only their duty. It would have been more befitting if you had thought of the displaced Syrians who had to leave their destroyed cities. The blood of their sons from the rockets of “shahed al quds” [“the martyr of the Quds,” i.e., Soleimani] has still not dried ... they forget that this “martyr,” in his quest to “liberate” Palestine, displaced hundreds of thousands of the children of the Syrian people who were true supporters of the Palestinian cause.⁶³

Here, the language of blood and displacement is not “negative affects” so much as a positive expression of grassroots solidarity and anti-colonial resistance, which attest that Soleimani’s mission of anti-imperialism is just a smoke screen. In pulling the rug of “anti-imperialism” from under Soleimani’s feet, the “anti-imperial” title is claimed for the Syrian revolutionary movement.

Indigenous sovereignty is also shown to be threatened by the mutually constitutive role of external colonizers with authoritarian regimes. Soleimani is depicted as a foreign invader coterminous with the authoritarianism of the “local” Assad regime, speaking to how internal/external structures are enmeshed with one another. Iran is argued to have clandestinely suppressed the Syrian uprising from its very early days and long before Iran’s presence became “openly visible” in 2013.⁶⁴ The alliance of Soleimani with the Assad regime is also contended through the symbolism of photographs of him with Syrian regime soldiers, or with Duraïd Awad, the lieutenant in charge of the Assad regime’s infamous Tiger Forces militia.⁶⁵ This is taken as evidence of Soleimani’s coordinated strategy with leaders of the Syrian regime and his training of Syrian regime fighters in the killing of their own people. Elsewhere, a minor but significant detail is brought to the audience’s attention: on the day of his death in Iraq, not only did Soleimani arrive in Baghdad airport on a Wings of Damascus airline owned by Rami Makhlouf (a vilified regime figure and first cousin of Bashar al Assad), but he had Syrian currency in his pocket.⁶⁶

Another character of the heterarchical nature of the colonial is the “quid pro quo” between various external colonizers to further the aims of the colonizing power. This is demonstrated through a narration of how external colonizers (such as Russia, Iran, and the United States) work together in the service of maintaining authoritarian domination. For example, it is postulated that it was only after Soleimani traveled to Moscow in 2015 that “the map of Syria [was put] on the table,” and Putin was convinced to intervene with air power to save the Assad regime from collapse.⁶⁷ The same article argues that Iranian imperialism in Iraq was “permitted” in exchange for silence on U.S. imperialism in the region. In these discursive articulations, various colonizers are diachronically, spatially, and conceptually fused, juxtaposed, and connected. Soleimani was not just a foreign invader undertaking colonial expeditions, but an enabler of the colonization of Syrians by the Syrian regime and a host of others.

In sum, these radical critiques of the colonial order reveal the heterarchical workings of colonization and the interlocking systems that must be dismantled to achieve universal emancipation. The colonial procedures of internal and external colonizers are remarked as global systems rooted in racist ideologies that work in tandem with one another. By bringing to bear the links between colonial logics and the endurance of authoritarian rule, Indigenous liberatory struggle (often thought of as primarily local in nature) is situated as an existential struggle at odds with all oppressors, across time and space. Hence, the prospect of revolutionary rupture with authoritarianism only occurs through an acknowledgment of the interrelationship between the various structures of colonization, and to some degree, the global. In evoking the colonial as global, there is an implicit repudiation of the dominant conception of colonialism as a uniquely white settler project. Unveiling the heterarchical nature of colonization points to how decolonial strategies must re-think colonization as a one-way power relation between the colonizer and the colonized, and the operative modes of colonialism, which overlap, reinforce, and even contradict one another.

Rhetoric of the U.S. American left

In what follows, I present the response from the other side of the line, so to speak, contemplating the rhetorical framing of Soleimani's assassination by the U.S. American left. This includes media coverage from leading leftist news outlet, such as *Jacobin* and *Current Affairs*, as well as statements by democratic political representatives and opinion leaders from the U.S. American left. As Syrians rejoiced, the U.S. American left foregrounded competing concerns for making meaning of the assassination. First is the evocation of the U.S. nation state as a rogue aggressor. This rhetoric shows the U.S. as an unprecedented imperial aggressor and outlier to other nation states in its propensity to colonize other nations. Second, a narrative of apologia, mired with convictions of guilt and regret, marks Soleimani as an apolitical victim. All non-white state actors are seen to be inherently colonized and by extension, colonial brown actors emerge as apolitical victims. Third, and as a consequence of the above, an epistemic closure occurs on revolutionary subjects and their non-normative articulations of liberation. The analysis invites consideration on the dialectical relationship between a hyperbolic identification with one's imperial nation ("I") and the alienation of revolutionary subjects, who are at once non-apprehendable and non-grievable.

The rogue aggressor

First, a narrative of apologia expresses regret over U.S. actions and its responsibility for the tragedies that have befallen the region. While contesting the U.S. as an exceptional moral actor, exceptionalism still permeates throughout. It myopically, simplistically, and egotistically positions the West, or the white colonial power of the U.S., as a singular source of evil in the Middle East. For instance, one article articulates the U.S. as responsible for all the "instability that's gripped that region."⁶⁸ Another directly compares Iran and the U.S. to suggest Iran is morally superior given its lack of colonial acts:

Iran hasn't overthrown what passes for American democracy, forced a dictatorship on it, aided an invasion of the country, participated in chemical warfare against the US or destroyed the US economy. The American military has fifty-three military bases ... Iran has no bases or soldiers in Canada or Mexico.⁶⁹

Of course, from the Syrian vantage point, the above statement is incredible to read, precisely because it effaces Iran as a colonial actor, which forced a dictatorship on the Syrian people. Iran *has* invaded Syria, in what could be called an “annexationist, predatory, plunderous” manner.⁷⁰ Iran retains several multiple military bases across Syria,⁷¹ even if it has none in Canada or Mexico. For the colonized, the histories of oppression are embodied, tangible, and not forgettable. As situated subjects impelled by their experiences with military bases in their country, the suppression of the brown revolutionary subject under the white gaze is unmistakable in the text.

Narratives of apologia are remorseful for the “profound harm” and “warmongering” of U.S. imperial aggression,⁷² with no concomitant allusion to the quotidian realities in the region, which are arguably far more complex than the unitary assumption of U.S. American guilt. As Syrian activist Leila Al-Shami states, “everything that happens is viewed through the prism of what it means for westerners—only white men have the power to make history.”⁷³ When the U.S. is the only “rogue state” worthy of reference and dichotomies of innocence and aggression employed,⁷⁴ we foreclose a recognition of “complex victims” such as Soleimani (a term from Bouris).⁷⁵ Cartesian “either-or” logics allow for U.S. military force and abuse of power to be the axes around which blame galvanizes. In merely deliberating U.S. empire, undivided allegiance to the U.S. body politic remains intact. Here, I quote the ever-prescient Edward Said who aptly describes the problem that occurs when only the West is seen as able to exert dominance on others (though in reference to the Orientalist Joseph Conrad):

All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West ... He could neither understand that India, Africa, and South America also had lives and cultures with integrities not totally controlled by the gringo imperialists and reformers of the world, nor allow himself to believe that anti-imperialist independence movements were not all corrupt and in the pay of the puppet masters in London or Washington.⁷⁶

In some ways, the U.S. American left's acknowledgment of itself as an imperial power is admirable and situationally appropriate considering the U.S. has been embroiled in the historical legacies of imperialism and colonial domination in the region.⁷⁷ As Escobar states, the U.S. illustrates a willingness to enforce dominance with unprecedented violence globally and has vested interests in framing certain groups as terrorists and others as not.⁷⁸ However, in this instance, a centeredness on the U.S. produces an enervation of the lived experiences of revolutionary subjects. Indeed, in the inability to perceive of “alternative(s) to [its own] cruel tautology,”⁷⁹ the U.S. as an exceptional evil actor is just another form of colonialist elitism. Assumptions of superiority dominate “all forms of contemporary knowledge,” especially when it comes to discussion of the colonial.⁸⁰ The U.S. American left is no exception in its obsession with itself as a totalitarian marauder on the world stage.

In addition, the U.S. American left's reactions to Soleimani's assassination exemplifies the limits of whiteness discourse when critical race analysis functions not as an analysis of events but as a catechism. When whiteness is only understood in racially provincial terms, it distorts

our understandings of transnational contexts that involve inter-racial collusion. Whiteness shifts from a well-deserved critique to an anti-colonial logic, which contradictorily justifies oppressive regimes and oppressive actors. To say it differently, the U.S. as a uniquely evil force in world affairs evokes a form of white privilege, which masks its erasure of others through the metanarrative of anti-coloniality. When the U.S. occupies the full space-time of imperial aggression, it is always and already in “a criminal act.”⁸¹ Reverse moral exceptionalism becomes rotten with its own perfection, cloaking the operations of others who might share the U.S.’s racist ideology of imperialism. An apocalyptic occupation with U.S. aggression in the region, which simultaneously does not attribute agency (or accountability) to brown actors for aggressions on other brown bodies encourages a superficial discernment of the realities in the region. As Smith et al. state, “not all settlers are white.”⁸² In the passivity toward non-white colonizers and authoritarian regimes, the U.S. American left becomes inadvertently complicit in a system it theoretically opposes.

At this juncture, I draw an analogy to how reverse moral exceptionalism functions as “mise en abyme,” a technique of placing copies of an image within the image itself in an infinitely recurring sequence. “Mise en abyme” (i.e., “put in the abyss”) refers to the literary phenomenon where one places oneself in the center of works of art. While this might be lauded as self-awareness, it is also a form of monological textual reproduction in which self-expression becomes ahistorical and fundamentally asocial. The narrative fulfills its desire to be displaced and its totalizing intent achieves its search for convergence. Mise en abyme makes the narrator “an enemy of himself.”⁸³ Importantly, this maneuver is “blind to the discursive decentering” of others.⁸⁴ Through over-identification with the weight of its own imperialism, events cannot be explained in terms of more than one set of determining factors. The U.S.’s sins are so all-encompassing that no one can escape them. In denying the possibility of multiple exigencies, Soleimani’s crimes are a discursive impossibility.

Opressors as apolitical victims

Second, Soleimani is constituted as a victim through an ethotic negation of Soleimani’s evil reputation. This ethos rehabilitation occurs through prolepsis, that is, either potential objectionable facts are not conferred or they are passed over to caution the reader against them. In the incomplete crafting of Soleimani’s character is a preference for testimony that fits stable configurations of meaning. Instead of acknowledging Soleimani as an agent of historical violence in his own right, he is manipulated into a victim within a narrative of U.S. exceptional aggression. Soleimani becomes a moral fulcrum under attack, freed of responsibility or volition, and removed from politics. This rhetoric employs a closure on the character of Soleimani, exempting Soleimani from his acts, to accomplish ideological and political ends.

To illustrate, for example, Michael Moore, the Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker on capitalism and social justice issues and prominent U.S. American left figure, in several tweets, apologizes to the state of Iran and Ayatollah Khameni, expressing admiration for the thousands who came to Soleimani’s funeral. He warns against being “trained to hate him” and sarcastically asked if anyone knew him or remembered what this “bad guy” had done.⁸⁵ Likewise, in a CNN interview, democratic senator Bernie Sanders draws an analogy between the assassination of Soleimani and Russia’s

assassinations of political dissidents.⁸⁶ Soleimani was hailed a “martyr to US bullying.” Without Soleimani, the audience is notified that the Middle East is “certainly ... less safe.”⁸⁷ Soleimani may have “lost some of this sheen,” but endures as “one of the most popular” figures and a “war hero” in Iran.⁸⁸ Terms such as “dissident,” “martyr,” and “hero” constitute epideictic praise of Soleimani as a good other-worldly character.

Rhetorically speaking, the meaning of the event is controlled by anticipating objections to one’s stance by entreating the reader not to consider certain facts or by discounting certain truths. For instance, in the string of articles published by the political magazine *Jacobin* in the days after the assassination, none mention Iranian imperialism in Iraq, Syria, or Yemen.⁸⁹ In *Current Affairs*, the public is cautioned against acknowledging Soleimani as a murderer, as a “needless concession.”⁹⁰ Another article also notes that “some things are better left unsaid” related to concerns of Soleimani’s wrongdoings in the region.⁹¹ Further, one article gestures to Soleimani’s popularity as an indication of the questionability of U.S. actions. Raising doubts as to whether Soleimani’s death was greeted with “elation” [quotes in original article], the reader is informed that “most other news outlets reported that tens of thousands of mourners filled the streets of Tehran, many demanding vengeance.”⁹² Notwithstanding the outpouring of mourning at Soleimani’s death, in all these discourses is a maximization of precariousness of the aggressor while disregarding his many victims. Altogether, there is a deliberate downplaying of Iranian aggression and a refusal to lay bare Iranian colonialism in several countries in the Middle East. Narratives of Soleimani’s aggression do not fit neatly into hegemonic anti-colonialist epistemologies nor within the boundaries of anti-war activism.

Underlying these accounts is a plain subtext: the simmering anxiety that a fuller admission of the full measure of Soleimani’s character contaminates neutrality or one’s intellectual asepticism to the illegality of U.S. actions. Prominent social justice activist National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick objects to the killing of Soleimani, tweeting “there is nothing new about American terrorist attacks against Black and Brown people for the expansion of American imperialism.”⁹³ In this depiction, all brown subjects are homogenous victims of U.S. American imperialism, despite the fact that the “global South cannot equally be seen as one single sphere of vulnerability.”⁹⁴ The assassination is a “US-engineered calamity for the Middle East,”⁹⁵ as if Syria is not already in a precarious situation because of the intervention of a wide variety of nation state actors, including Iran, long before the assassination. These forms of reverse moral exceptionalism exhibit the tendency to decline recognition of the agency of other evil actors in a blithe predetermination of meaning. As Syrian activist Sarah Huneidi writes in the title of her op-ed: “Iran’s wars kill innocents just like America’s do.”⁹⁶ By excluding aspects of Soleimani’s character, exceptionalism erases and renders (the persecution of) Syrian subjects unintelligible. When Syrian lives exceed recognizable frames, they trouble our established sense of things. We become “oblivious to the fact that people in other parts of the world have agency too, and that they can exercise it both to oppress others and to fight against oppression.”⁹⁷

Absent revolutionary subjects

Finally, when the lines between the victim and the perpetrator are blurred, Soleimani is “present” as a victim at the expense of the presence of *his* victims. As Butler and

Athanasίου say, “presence is constantly haunted by its spectral absence.”⁹⁸ In other words, dispossession, or “social death” occurs by the presence of another. In this case, the revolutionary subject fighting colonial disruption and displacement disappears behind the macropolitical rhetoric of nation states and nation state leaders. In the words of Levinas, there is not even the impersonality of the anonymous “there is”—there was *no* “there is.”⁹⁹ The revolutionary subject is by and large not invoked, not a part of the scenery, let alone a compelling subject of pivotal concern. Revolutionary subjects, many of them Soleimani’s victims, are not rhetorically constituted and as a result, their agency is evacuated. In stifling the revolutionary subject in this manner is a withdrawal from the intimacy of their testimony and the micropolitics of their resistance as a terrain of meaning. Their testimony is deemed hollow in the face of the righteous cause of “anti-imperialism” and the martyrdom of Soleimani.

In a bifurcated rhetorical function, an attachment to the mythos of U.S. colonial/imperial exceptionalism divorces one from the material struggles of the revolutionary subject. The “imperial presidency” is mobilized to absolve Soleimani of his colonial sins.¹⁰⁰ In this pardoning of Soleimani is a Manichaean refusal to consider that which threatens one’s own ideas about how the world is ordered. One of the ramifications of the suppression of the phenomenology of the revolutionary subject is an “avoidance of narrative.” Edward Said called this a “surreptitious mixing in of hierarchies, doctrines, and unadmitted prejudices in the text.”¹⁰¹ Their lives are not registered for fear of the “unanticipated results” of this recognition.¹⁰²

When all brown subjects are victims of U.S. white supremacy, the specific density of the individual experiences of Others is impermissible. They can *only* be a victim of the U.S., and if not, then we should conveniently not hear from them. The U.S.’s imperialism and the realities of suffering at the hands of another become impossible to reconcile. From this epistemological simplicity, a preference for certain kinds of testimony is inculcated. In its uninventiveness, an unwillingness to apprehend the revolutionary subject is incited—an “incapacity to take [one’s] imagination” where others demand it go.¹⁰³ The inability to entertain complexity means anything outside of pre-established knowledge, in this case, U.S. imperialism, has no space to go. In rhetorical fidelity to the narrative of the U.S. as an unparagoned aggressive nation, Syrian existence is impermissible.

Lauren Berlant warns of the risk of overt focus on the U.S. as a nation state in their writings: “when the nation form [is] at the center of the history of the present tense ... [we] underdescribe the experiences and political struggles of persons across the globe.”¹⁰⁴ One falls on “already completed meanings ... instead of remain[ing] open to an ‘impossible’ answer.”¹⁰⁵ No individualism or subjectivity is offered to those who are not worthy of acknowledgment if not victims of U.S. American imperialism. Reverse moral exceptionalism adheres to acutely entrenched values that take on a predictive quality. In the firm attachment to nationalist logics of right and wrong, a *de facto* dismissal of others and their truths is produced. This rigorousness usurps the space that might accommodate the unimaginable subjectivities of revolutionary subjects.

Conclusion

[T]hose of us positioned on the intellectual left are also (and often despite ourselves) creating outsiders to our own desiring inclusivities.¹⁰⁶

Through exploring the rhetorical response to an extraordinary political event outside the U.S., this article brings to the fore the unexpected ways in which grievable subjects are symbolically crushed within nationalistic ideologies of those who purport to stand with others in struggles against their oppressors. By looking at a cross-section of “texts” that deal with reactions to the same event, we observe the uneasy tensions and competing narratives between the subjectivities of revolutionary subjects and the U.S. American left. On the one hand, the grassroots gaiety, sorrows, and anti-colonial discourse of Syrian testimony foster a remembering of the oppressor from the perspective of victims. On the other hand, the exceptionalist logics of the U.S. American left articulate narratives of apologia, which remember the oppressor as a victim. Through the juxtaposition of these two rememberings, I reveal the epistemic closure on revolutionary subjects and the coolness with which the sanctity of their testimony is met. Deliberation on reverse moral exceptionalism serves as a decolonizing practice against white supremacy and the invisible processes through which others are racialized, obscured, and their histories overwritten.

More importantly, this article has been driven by the ethical imperative of centering the revolutionary subject and the powerful affective registers this carries for solidarity. Solidarity must be carved from a genealogy that honors revolutionary subjects and their lived knowledge in spaces where negotiation over meaning is ongoing. When we operate within paradigms that center our own identities and histories, victims become at once non-apprehendable and non-grievable. Reverse moral exceptionalism is unfortunately not anomalous, but rather emblematic of the U.S. American left’s reactionary impulse to crises around the world. In this present moment, the response of segments of the U.S. American left to Ukrainian oppression and Russian military assault indicates similar machinations at play. No doubt, a conscious location of actors, processes, ideologies, and master narratives that make one “capable of speech but incapable of listening” is in order.¹⁰⁷ Without this reckoning, we chafe at the distinction between the victim and aggressor, between the freedom struggle of the oppressed and the tyranny of their oppressor. One person’s terrorist becomes another’s hero. Harms are unaddressed and color affective relations not only between the oppressed and the oppressor, but between the oppressed and those who care deeply about justice.

In conclusion, I ask communication scholars who take their critical commitments seriously to reconsider the larger philosophy of U.S. American exceptionalism within the U.S. American social imaginary. Rhetorical scholars need to be cognizant of how those on “both sides of aisle,” even those who champion liberatory politics, are implicated in nationalistic ideologies, which inadvertently support some imperialisms against others. It is my hope that by illuminating practices of moral exceptionalism that have gone unnoticed, rhetorical scholarship becomes more sensitive to the nuanced workings of inter-racial collusion and the interlocking colonial systems that must be dismantled to achieve universal emancipation. Above all, this article casts light on the critical sensibilities offered by transnational Other, be they Indigenous, Black, or brown. We are behooved to acknowledge the affective power of revolutionary subjects as grounding an alternative basis for solidarity, one based on a commitment to imagining the lives of those who stand elsewhere.

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