1 *Visualizing Corpse Politics*

Several years ago, when the images of Syrian torture victims' dead bodies were released by a photographer who had worked for the Syrian security forces and defected, I printed them out on a communal office printer, since my individual office printer did not print in color. I wanted to have them as a reference to go back to and, given the uncertainty of internet links, I didn't want to rely on being able to access them again online. In fact, having followed the publication of dead body images as an area of academic study for quite some time, I was also concerned that over the following days, the pictures would be removed from public access due to their graphic nature, the same way beheading images had been removed from online platforms and rescinded by media publications. The 9/11 falling body images had steadily been removed over time as they became considered too obscene to be seen (Auchter 2014), and some news outlets determined after the fact that, in the name of propriety, they should not have published the image of dead Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi (Papailias 2019, 1054). In working on this project, I wanted a printed record of these images coming out of Syria to refer back to later, to examine for the evidence they provided of the atrocities carried out by the Syrian government. The communal printer was located in the office area of our administrative assistant. I began printing the images, then I realized that anyone could access them before I had a chance to get to the printer, so I ran down the hall and yelled out, don't look at the stuff I'm printing! I then realized how strange that request was, and said, I am printing something graphic and obscene, so I didn't want you to be startled unnecessarily (my form of a trigger warning to our administrative assistant, I suppose). This then led to an awkward conversation where I had to explain that indeed I was not printing pornography, and I was not violating any university regulations by viewing pornography on my university-owned computer. Indeed, I was looking at a different type of obscene images altogether: those of tortured and dead bodies, images

that bore the photographic evidence of state violence against civilians, and some that depicted violence done to young children. After explaining the context, I began thinking about my reaction to the photos, and this led me to several thoughts.

First, the idea of obscenity itself seems to be clear-cut initially, but there is a whole set of responses that blur these lines. If I had been printing out graphic sex, that would have been inappropriate, but printing out graphic violence was acceptable, yet still only within the confines of my research. In other words, obscenity was rendered acceptable for that particular purpose, along with the assumption that I was doing something important with it. I have often asked the students in the Genocide class I teach to reflect on similar dynamics: To what extent is it acceptable to break the taboo governing viewing dead bodies if it serves an educational purpose, such as teaching students about the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide? Museum curators struggle with these same questions, in terms of how to drive home the reality of what occurred, given cultural norms governing human dignity, balanced with the need for viewers to have emotional responses to atrocity. In this sense, obscenity is not an objective reality, but a construct that takes different forms in different instances.

Second, there is a protective impulse at play with regard to viewing obscene things. My first inclination was to prevent others from having to see the things that I was seeing and that I had to look at as part of my research. This can be seen in the media's injunctions to not view obscene images, where the media acts as an intermediary, viewing obscene images so that the public doesn't have to, but still premised on the notion that someone needs to be the one looking at these, primarily for information-gathering purposes. But in the humanitarian context, we often see the exact opposite: the injunction for everyone to look by invoking an ethical imperative. Indeed, these same images, that I was so careful to protect anyone else in my office from accidentally seeing in the communal printer, were later displayed at the United Nations building in New York as evidence of the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime, purposefully placed on display as a mechanism of raising awareness about the issue. Yet I have also had to struggle with the notion of myself as a necessary viewer of these images for the purpose of this project and consider the ethics of how to engage with images of violence and death, and have made some deliberate choices about the images I show in this book and those I do not.

Third, my main reason for printing the images was to act as evidence, which I would use later on to make specific arguments in a research project such as this one, similar to the way in which the pictures themselves were circulated by organizations such as Human Rights Watch as primary source evidence of a crime against humanity, the main reason for their display. Such images, then, are both objective evidence and deeply emotional. In this vein, viewing the dead can be human-making and humanizing – by spurring an affective and emotional response to the dead – and can also be destructive of the human, human dignity, and human empathy – by rendering the dead an inert commodity for our visual consumption. In other words, viewing the dead involves taking account of an inherent tension at play with regard to the display of the dead. Additionally, it is only acceptable to display some dead bodies and only in some contexts, and displaying some dead impacts how others are hidden, while hiding some impacts how others are viewed (Sentilles 2018).

This book begins from this premise and asks about the visual politics of dead body images. Specifically, it examines the taboo that governs the viewing of the dead and the politics of its construction, reinforcement, violation, and instantiation. Under what circumstances is it deemed appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, to publish and look at images of dead bodies? Under what other circumstances is viewing such obscene images taboo, and what can this differentiation tell us about international politics?

In other words, this project begins with the taboo that governs viewing the dead. I ask after the circumstances in which the taboo, which I characterize as the "obscenity norm," is transgressed and others in which it is upheld via a complex mechanism of fear and trigger warnings, to illustrate the complex visual politics of the global dead. I argue that choices about what images to show and whether to put them behind a trigger warning are not simply choices made by individual media outlets (though I do examine the rules governing such publication), but rather indicative of larger political discourses that determine what counts as obscene and thus which bodies are sufficiently human to be entitled to the dignity that is culturally and politically associated with the dead. That is, there seems to be a difference between images we are "supposed" to engage with and those we are not. This difference can tell us something about contemporary global politics.

Specifically, the key argument of this book is that the taboo governing dead body images is applied inconsistently across cases, and this can demonstrate how political communities muster the obscenity norm in service of a story of who belongs. The taboo on viewing the dead is in fact violated frequently in ways that cannot simply be understood through the politics of self/other and require very specific discursive justifications. These narratives of exceptionality make possible particular politics.

The book takes obscenity as a framing concept and illustrates the politics of obscenity by looking at several cases: where images of the dead are so obscene that they must be seen to spur humanitarian action (such as the display of photographs of torture victims in Syria); where images of the dead are so obscene that they are circulated to project a narrative that the persons depicted are subhuman and easily defeated (such as images of a dead Qaddafi in Western media outlets); where images of the dead are too obscene to be shown (as in beheading videos or the images of American soldiers dead in the war-on-terror); and where images achieve a complex visual status because they are deemed threatening in themselves (such as the unseen images of a dead Osama bin Laden). At times, such as during humanitarian disasters, we are told that there is a moral imperative associated with looking that can spur empathy and international action. At other times, we are told that looking is disgusting and treasonous, as with Islamic State (ISIS) beheadings or the images of 9/11's falling bodies. This inconsistency in application of the obscenity norm, or what counts as *too obscene* to be viewed, can shed light on the political functioning of obscenity as a mechanism of image regulation.

This argument speaks to recent work on visual politics in the field of international relations (IR) that examines how war in particular is mediated through visual images (Guittet and Zevnik 2014). I follow David Shim's notion that images have a "visual grammar" that can tell us how objects and subjects are positioned relative to one another and to the viewer (Shim 2014, 34). Indeed, it is important to examine the visual politics of dead body images precisely because people are often characterized as ethical subjects by virtue of their ability to see, defined as "agents of sight (regardless of their biological capacity to see) and as the objects of certain discourse of visuality" (Mirzoeff 2005, 3). In other words, seeing is often equated with political subjectivity, and being seen is often considered to be a prerequisite for political change.

Methodologically, then, this book follows a critical visual methodology in which the focus is on "the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations in which it is embedded; and that means thinking about the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by, ways of seeing and imaging" (Rose 2001, 3). It is about the images themselves, their wider context, but also about us as viewers, including who we are, what we see, and how and why we see.

While several scholars have noted the emergence of new visual regimes wherein war is rendered hyper-visible, at the same time these visualities are managed via a technology of erasure that blurs parts of images and removes others from our line of sight, so as to manage the context under which the visual encounter occurs. Such regulation matters partly because of the presumed taboo that exists governing viewing the dead. This taboo tells us that dead bodies are something private and should be managed by the funerary industry, yet instances of political violence and even natural disasters thrust such bodies into the public realm and raise questions for statecraft. That is, what happens to dead bodies is more than ever a key question given the nature of political violence, the fact that it is often materially enacted on bodies, and the forms of new media that allow images of such violence to proliferate. Despite the emergence of new genres of visual politics and new materialisms within the IR literature, there still haven't been sustained examinations of the dead body as a key nexus in the intersection of these genres. Part of this is likely due to the way in which dead bodies are both literally and figuratively buried after atrocities, and the norm that persists across most cultures that the dead body is not routinely intended to be viewed outside of the funerary industry, and is largely consigned to the private realm, even if the circumstances of death were deeply political in nature. Yet debates about release of dead body images and indeed media regulations governing their publication indicate that there is something about the presence of particular dead bodies that can be disturbing.

The dead body, then, is a key site where international politics is taking place in numerous ways. Each visual engagement with the dead body, particularly when enmeshed in larger discourses of grief, triumph, pity, vengeance, threat, nationalism, and others, may tell us something about the political communities we form and the deaths and lives invoked to construct, structure, and preserve them. Indeed, "how

the dead . . . are depicted expresses the aesthetic, epistemological, and political preoccupations of a particular cultural moment" (Tait 2006).[1] Obscenity is circulated and recirculated through photography and the new forms of media that so much of the world now has access to. The obscene corpse is very much a political figure, despite narratives that often try to consign the dead body to the private realm as a family matter. As a result, it bears examining those circumstances when dead bodies proliferate, when they are viewed and why, and what this can tell us about how we form political communities and consider politically qualified life and death.

To address the politics of viewing the global dead, I explore a fundamental paradox, which emerges because we assume that dead bodies are possessed of human dignity, yet the two main types of viewing of the dead I discuss throughout the book speak very differently to this notion. In the case of humanitarian awareness, dead body images are displayed to give these deaths the dignity of global attention. Yet in the case of dead enemy bodies, dead body images are displayed to strip the bodies of their dignity as a means to dehumanize the enemy. How can dead body images both rehumanize and dehumanize? A key aim of the chapters that follow is to reckon with this paradox, and to begin to clarify not only the nature of these images, but the political work they do, which is key to understanding how these very different narratives emerge. That is, each visual engagement with the dead body, particularly when enmeshed in larger discourses, may shed light on the deaths and lives invoked to construct, structure, and preserve the political communities we invoke as the subjects of security.

As these images circulate, there is a "we" invoked in the framing. That is, images intended to rehumanize the dead focus on doing so to a specific audience, while images that dehumanize invoke the boundaries of particular political communities to speak to an audience who "gets the joke," so to speak. To be clear, the book is focused on the role of dead bodies in Western modernity, and thus focuses on Western media outlets and sensibilities, which is the "we" and "our" invoked throughout. It specifically focuses on two main empirical contexts: the "global war-on-terror," which, despite its name, is primarily a Western

[1] I should note here that Tait's point is mainly about how such bodies are depicted in popular culture, and she views popular culture as the scene to examine the expressions of culture. My milieu of examination is a less conventionally accepted cultural site to examine similar functioning.

narrative, and the use of images in humanitarian awareness, whose narratives tend to primarily begin in the West and be driven by Western assumptions (Durand 2012). Though this focus is limited and does not allow for generalization across cultural context either with regard to media framings or norms governing the dead, it allows me to pinpoint the functioning of two particular and paradoxical narratives of the global dead in Western discourse, one cut at thinking about the politics of viewing the dead. Though I do make some assumptions about the "West" for the purposes of this project, I also problematize the idea of this "we" further in Chapter 2, where I note that this narrative is itself embedded in exclusionary politics from within as well as related to outside others. The role of the remainder of this introductory chapter is to contextualize my initial arguments within work on visual politics.

Representing the Dead in Global Politics

The main focus of this book is not on images in and of themselves, but on images of a very particular subject matter: dead bodies. Life and death are increasingly coming to the fore of investigations in global politics, following Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics (2003). Similarly, bodies have recently emerged as a key subject matter of IR scholarship (Agathangelou 2011; Marlin-Bennett and Walton 2010; Shinko 2010; Steele 2013; Wilcox 2014). While death and killing as a mechanism of sovereign governance have been explored by those adopting Mbembe's framing, and embodiment is being theorized heartily, dead bodies as material artifacts have been under-addressed. Dead bodies and death are out of place in most approaches to global politics (Dixit 2015), and "even when the dead and injured do make an appearance, they tend only to appear in the most narrow and one-dimensional form" (Gregory 2016, 949). Himadeep Muppidi has noted that "International Relations is a field littered with dead and dying bodies. But the dead never seem to rot or stink . . . International Relations overflows with corpses" (2012, 3). His point is that while IR tends to focus on conflict, global political economy, or international law, these subjects often remain separate from the material aftereffects and impacts of these on human bodies.

Due to the assumption long held in many cultural traditions that dead bodies are a matter for the private realm, they have not frequently been considered to be the subject of investigations of global politics,

with few exceptions, focusing primarily on the dead body as forensic evidence of atrocity or issues of dead body management (Verdery 1999). Similarly, IR's association with global or state levels of analysis has consigned dead bodies to the private realm. This book should be seen as a response to Muppidi's call to engage the sensory evidence of the stench of dead bodies in the way we theorize global politics and as an effort to begin to situate the global dead within existing visual politics approaches to global politics, adopting a needed micropolitical approach to global corpse politics.

When they have been examined, scholars focusing on dead bodies in global politics have emphasized the dimensions of dead body management, particularly sovereignty (Stepputat 2014). Such work examines tensions between states and non-state actors related to how corpses are managed, including the key site of mass graves, which have been theorized as transnational spaces (Robben and Ferrandiz 2015). Gravesites in particular have been discussed as significant sites of contestation within ethnic conflict or as forensic evidence of mass atrocity (Rosenblatt 2015). Yet this focus on graves only addresses dead bodies tangentially, as symbols of larger forms of identity conflict or as hallmarks of state mismanagement or crises of sovereignty. Still, it nicely highlights the larger politics of emotion at play with regard to corpse politics, including grieving, mourning, and remembering the dead. During ethnic or identity conflict, tensions often rise surrounding sites of past conflict, symbolized by exhumation of the dead (Ross 2013). Bereavement itself has been considered a political form (Weisband 2009), key to understanding the role of memory in international politics.

Within historical approaches to conflict, scholars have examined dead bodies and the larger politics of burial and repatriation (Hawley 2005; Sledge 2007). This work catalogues the history of soldier remains, including the priority given to military fallen in strategic development and in conflict resolution. In the wider context of military effectiveness, body recovery in wartime is a key soldier morale issue (Sledge 2007, 16). Specifically, in the US context, during and after the Vietnam War, the issue of the missing and the larger dilemma of effective repatriation highlight the way in which corpses often enter into more traditional security and conflict policy discussions (Hawley 2005). This also raises larger questions about the legal personhood of the dead (Cantor 2010).

While these texts are significant, they tell us several things about the limitations in how the dead are addressed. First, studies that examine the dead body in global politics tend to focus on management. While many of these studies are comprehensive in scope, they tell us more about the state or international organizations than about death or the dead, with Heath-Kelly (2016) as perhaps a key exception.[2] In much of the work addressing the global dead, corpses become the empirical context to explore larger questions about sovereignty (Stepputat 2014), statecraft (Verdery 1999), globalization (Casper and Moore 2009), ethnic tensions (Rosenblatt 2015), or body counts (Fazal 2014; Spagat et al. 2009).

Second, some scholars are already talking about the dead and the impact dead bodies may have on how we think about global politics, but dead bodies remain only implicit referents, as I have noted elsewhere (Auchter 2016b). Particularly within security studies, the dead are often treated as material objects to be counted and managed, where large numbers of dead can be evidence of military success or of humanitarian crisis. In this way they are seen in the public realm as forensic objects and in the private realm as immensely human loved ones still. This binary treatment makes it difficult to conceive of the myriad ways the dead are lively political actors. How and when they are rendered visible and narrativized in global politics can tell us a lot about the political communities we form and the structures, practices, and identities that sustain them. Indeed, as Giroux (2006, 174) notes: "[C]adavers have a way of insinuating themselves on consciousness, demanding answers to questions that aren't often asked."

There has not been a large-scale study that examines the visual politics of the global dead, which this book purports to do. Why does this matter? Seeing the dead body is not simply material fact, but enmeshed in larger discourses of how we see, especially given the role of mediators in the context of images and their circulation, dissemination, and curation. Beyond this, constructivists have emphasized the importance of norms and their regulatory effects in global politics, and there has even been work on the taboo itself as a mechanism through

[2] In her *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite*, she focuses on how the state performs sovereignty by managing mortality. While her theorization of how the state performs sovereignty by managing mortality is excellent, her focus is more on death itself and less on the politics of corpses, as I address here. Still, I draw on her work theorizing mortality in my examination of the larger security dilemmas at play here.

which social construction impacts policymaking (Dolan 2013; Tannenwald 1999). The main goal of such work is to describe the strategic impact of a norm, the nuclear taboo for example, on behavior. The nuclear case offers some interesting parallels, as scholars in this area have focused on the emotional underpinning of norms, as in examinations of atomic anxiety (Sauer 2015). My focus draws on a social constructionist approach to describe the parameters of what could be termed the obscenity norm, discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2, yet the main focus is not on the strategic effects of this norm, but rather on the assumptions and understandings it relies on, which can speak to the recent turn to examining emotion in social constructivist work, following scholars such as Solomon (2015), and the wider focus on how emotions are learned and reinforced through social interactions (Crawford 2000, 128). In this sense, I focus on the emotional response of the viewer to particular images, and how that response is curated, constructed, and reinforced via the mechanism of the obscenity taboo.

Beyond this, my focus is on questions of security, and the extent to which things that are obscene function within a discourse of security questions. As Charlotte Heath-Kelly has noted, "death is ontologically coupled with state security practice" (2016, 1). Her work offers an excellent examination of mortality and the performance of sovereignty in mortality management at memorial sites. My book should be seen as a complement to her argument, particularly her encouragement that we move beyond a focus on killing, as it puts mortality in the control of the state (Heath-Kelly 2016, 3). I would argue that a focus on killing has removed our ability to engage with the material and visual aftereffects of such violence: dead bodies themselves. In this sense, while she moves beyond killing by focusing on mortality, I take the dead body image as the empirical focus to ask what work it does to sustain particular forms of security practice via the construction and transgression of the obscenity norm. In this vein, I follow the call for more substantive work on the role that emotions play in the relationship between visuality and security (Bleiker 2018b, 194).

Rehumanization and Dehumanization: Viewing the Global Dead

To highlight what is at stake in a text about corpse politics, the rest of this chapter primarily functions to introduce the two main stories that