

## 'skylarking' | *Homosexual Panic and the Death of Private Kovco*

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In April 2006, facing an increasingly distrustful public reception to its policy of military involvement in Iraq, the Australian government struggled to contain any further 'collateral damage' after the death of the first Australian soldier in Iraq. Private Jake Kovco had not died in combat but after an incident in his barracks room, where he was shot in the head by his own service pistol. Early reports were unable to verify details of the incident, an embarrassing factual uncertainty which was only magnified by unsatisfactory or unlikely explanations offered and then retracted by the Defence Minister, Brendan Nelson. In his first media release on the matter, Nelson announced that the as-yet-unnamed soldier 'appear[ed] at least to have accidentally shot himself in the course of handling his weapon'.<sup>1</sup> Then, according to news reports appearing shortly after, Kovco was believed to have been cleaning his gun when the accidental shooting occurred.<sup>2</sup> But in a statement some days later, Nelson attempted to correct inaccurate explanations of the fatal discharge of the weapon, now casting significant doubt on both the incident and the Department of Defence's ability to investigate it and report it accurately. In this version of events, Kovco was neither handling nor even touching the weapon, which was only 'near him in his vicinity'. Nonetheless, he 'made some kind of movement which suggests that it discharged', Nelson continued. As the newspaper report quoting this explanation also points out, for Kovco to have been shot in this manner would have required both 'an extraordinary effort' on his part and a breach of firearm safety standards to have left his weapon loaded in the barracks.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneous to this first round of media and ministerial speculation, the offence that these ambiguities no doubt caused Private Kovco's family was exacerbated by the bungled attempt to return the soldier's body to Australia. Some hours after the scheduled arrival of the

flight carrying the casket, Nelson was forced to admit to Kovco's family and then to waiting journalists that the correct body had mistakenly been left in the Middle East. The casket which was to have been greeted by the Kovco family at Melbourne airport in the early hours of the morning had in fact contained the body of a stranger, later identified as a Bosnian citizen.

In this essay, I analyse key examples of language used during the Kovco case in what I call a panic of reconstruction: attempts in media reports, ministerial press releases and inquiry testimony to restabilise the metonymic masculine and national embodiment of Private Kovco in the face of speculation and unknowing obscuring the circumstances of his death. Notably, a tension between key phrases from the testimony of one of Kovco's roommates and the military inquiry's ultimate findings illuminates the specific anxieties of homosexual panic that structures certain Western nationalist masculinities and the military culture built around their defence. Moreover, in revisiting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on homosexual panic, suggestive overlaps become apparent in the discursive regulations of homosociality that structure heteronormative masculinity and Orientalist figures of terrorism currently perceived as threats to it. The politics of responsibility and entitlement in relation to individual masculine subjects and nation-states provide a means, later in the essay, to unpack double standards around the legitimisation of violence.

The discursive recuperation of Jake Kovco as a national hero began in earnest during the Melbourne airport media conference, in the midst of the Defence Minister's inability either to explain what he called the 'stuff up' of the body, to accept responsibility for it or even to offer the government's apology. Particularly telling is a change in the register of the minister's language, creating an uneasy slippage between the official and the personal. Having announced the error in highly formal and somewhat awkward phrasing, Nelson's answers to journalists' subsequent questions swung to a very different kind of political rhetoric:

I mean the first priority is let's get Jake back; let's make sure Australians know what a great soldier he was; how proud that we are of him; how proud his family and his mates were of him. Let's get him back and then let's find out what happened before we start assigning blame.<sup>4</sup>

Over-compensating for the stark absence of respect for Kovco's remains and for his family betrayed by the failed repatriation, Nelson both assumes a communal 'we' (who are proud of him; who know what a great soldier he was; who might agree on where to assign blame) and presumes the personal relation of mateship with Kovco (part of the 'us' who is getting Jake back; and that 'we' can feel comfortable calling him 'Jake').

When Private Kovco's body was correctly returned to Australia two days later, another ministerial media release took the opportunity to attempt to restore the idealised relationship of mutual pride between soldier and nation that the series of earlier missteps had jeopardised:

This man did his nation proud. His wife and mates said that he 'loved what he did and was a very proud Australian soldier'.

He was proud of us. We are proud of him.<sup>5</sup>

The work of recovering the deceased soldier's body can here be seen more fully as part of a recovery of him as someone displaying particular valued attributes, namely a masculinity deepened by heteronormativity, mateship and national pride. The media release also notes that Kovco was 'a highly skilled marksman', information that surely aims to recover the minister's reputation as much as Kovco's, given the curious lack of weapon-handling skill that Nelson had earlier attributed to him. As if to deflect attention away from this embarrassment, the media release then abruptly shifts from its solicitation of national mourning to an equally self-mandating directive to national silence on the details of the shooting incident:

Speculation surrounding the tragic circumstances of Private Kovco's death is not only unhelpful, it is hurtful to his grieving extended family whose privacy in this matter should be respected.<sup>6</sup>

The reasonableness of this statement would be easier to accept at face value had the Defence Department not already contributed significant hurt to Kovco's family by its own at best speculative explanations of the incident, generating a much wider discursive will-to-knowledge among the Australian media and public, familiarly framed as 'the public's right to know'. Whether the Kovco family's right to privacy deserves greater respect than the Australian public's right to know the details of the suspicious death of one of its military representatives is a question very much aside from the necessary incitement to discourse produced by the concealment of these circumstances.

I am arguing, then, that this widespread speculation about Kovco's death—on the part of the government as much as the media and the public—feeds into intertwining narratives of reconstruction and recovery. Most obvious are attempts to piece together the patchy details of the incident, as if reconstructing the scene from limited clues. Merging with this, through the recovery of Kovco's body, image and reputation, is the reconstruction of a stable image of nationality of which the body of the soldier becomes metonymic. The panic that propels both narratives emanates from the perceived instability caused by the many layers of unknowing embedded in the Kovco incident, especially, I argue, those relating to gender and sexuality as markers of national identity.

The unusual circumstances of Private Kovco's death place it outside the conventional frame of understanding with which a nation retrospectively assimilates its military casualties: death in combat as a brave and honourable self-sacrifice, *pro patria mori*. And as a bizarrely self-inflicted casualty, strictly speaking the death also fails to satisfy the euphemistic terms of

'friendly fire' and 'collateral damage' that are now commonly used within military discourse to offset the potential embarrassment or outrage of civilian and non-enemy deaths. Also threatened was the masculinist glorification that would normally accompany the return of the deceased soldier. The botched handling of Kovco's remains subverted the ceremonial significance of repatriation in which the deceased is used to emblemise nationalist values, the defence of which justifies combat. But later attempts to reconstruct the event of Kovco's shooting served only to deepen the threatening and panic-worthy uncertainty around the case and therefore the idealised version of nationalist masculinity that this panic was an attempt to recuperate.

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Until the start of the military inquiry into the circumstances of Private Kovco's death, two months after the fact, one of the most telling features of the case was the silence maintained by the two soldiers who were present during the shooting. Given so much curiosity, speculation and gossip about the incident, why had neither man come forward to set the record straight? They had not seen enough, it was claimed, to report on what had happened. The only witnesses to the incident had apparently witnessed almost nothing. Nonetheless, what might their silence have been concealing? More interestingly, of what is their silence revealing? Not only did these specific acts of silence, like all acts of silence, contribute to the production of extra curiosity, speculation and gossip but, further, this silence would have appeared to confirm, for some, the structural secrecy that forms part of the mythology of military culture.

Approached in this way, the men's initial silence and the Defence Department's claims that neither man had seen the shooting invite evaluation within the logic of enforced disavowal of seeing and knowing that was emblematised by the US military's infamous 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, introduced in the early 1990s. The refusal to open the door of the barracks room to outside scrutiny—the seeming refusal to countenance the knowability of activities within it—figures the space as a classic closet in the sense established by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Kendall Thomas elaborated on Sedgwick's theory as the Clinton administration was introducing its ambivalent attempt at non-exclusion of gays from the military. He offers the shower as a metonymic scene of the multiple layers of disavowal binding *all* soldiers. What he calls 'the scopophobia of straight male troops', manifest in their reported fears of being gazed upon by gay troops in the shower, can be read as 'the displaced expression of an epistemophobia or fear of knowledge which, by its very terms, its victims refuse to know'.<sup>7</sup>

Multiplying the disavowal of sexual identity imposed on gay soldiers is the wider disavowal of, first, knowledge of the presence of homosexual desire, and second, of the ambiguous fascination it holds for straight soldiers as what must be disavowed in order to stabilise their entitlement to heterosexual privilege. This paradox accords with Judith Butler's analysis of

the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, in which she proposes that this entitlement extends to the exclusive prerogative of defining who amongst their ranks may be known as homosexual, even while the knowing is officially disavowed. Butler discusses the policy's prohibition of any utterance of the term 'homosexual' as an act of self-description, in effect equating utterance of the term with performance of a homosexual act. The term 'homosexual' therefore 'comes to describe a class of persons who are to remain prohibited from defining themselves; the term is to be attributed always from elsewhere'. As a result:

A homosexual is one whose definition is to be left to others, one who is denied the act of self-definition with respect to his or her sexuality, one whose self-denial is a prerequisite for military service.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, of course, these means of regulation bring further into uncontrolled discourse what was intended to be rendered unspeakable, by those who intended to control speakability.

As Sedgwick's work has cemented in studies of gender and sexuality, a 'double bind' holds non-homosexually identified men in Western societies to a continuous state of panic, whereby overlaps and ambiguities in the range of homosocial relationships to which men forcibly conform constitute 'arbitrarily mapped, self-contradictory, and anathema-riddled quicksands', therefore producing a 'permanent threat' of masculine definitional ungroundedness.<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick's work has also illuminated the military as an obvious context for the playing out of these bonds and anxieties, as Thomas's 'shower scene' demonstrates and as numerous popular cultural texts continue to dramatise (not least of which is the military sub-genre of gay porn). Of the enforced 'self-ignorance' that inheres homosexual panic to military culture, Sedgwick writes:

In these institutions [the armed forces], where both men's manipulability and their potential for violence are at the highest possible premium, the *prescription* of the most intimate male bonding and the *proscription* of (the remarkably cognate) 'homosexuality' are both stronger than in civilian society—are, in fact, close to absolute.<sup>10</sup>

In this light, the early silence around the death of Private Kovco now appears as panicked maintenance work on a coercive and epistemophobic system of concealment if not self-ignorance. Rather than secreting unseeable and unknowable homosexual acts, the closet door of Kovco's barracks room was kept shut to enforce widespread disavowal of the visible continuity across a range of kinds of male homosocial bonding, of which homosexual acts between male soldiers might be one example.

It is important to stress here that I am not claiming Kovco and his colleagues were engaging in homosexual acts in their barracks room. The eventual glimpse of what they *were* doing,

however, as described in the inquiry testimony of one of the roommates, tells of the particularly generative anxiety with which the mere *possibility* of homosexuality shadowed the men's interpersonal behaviour. In his written statement read out at the June 2006 military inquiry, 'Soldier 17' reported that the shooting occurred accidentally as the trio laughed and sang along to a pop song. But his theory for what may have caused the accident is the most intriguing element:

The only way I thought he may have done it was in a joking fashion because of the song we were singing and the way we were singing it (in a female/homosexual way), that he pulled his pistol from his holster and placed it against his head in a manner to almost say, 'This is so gay I would rather be dead'.<sup>11</sup>

Momentarily setting aside this problematic conflation of 'female' and 'homosexual', which is both misogynistic and homophobic, Soldier 17's theory confirms the panic that might grip males in a moment of realisation that their private acts of bonding may have led them too easily along the unacknowledged continuum of homosocial desire into the quicksands of indefiniteness. Moreover, at least in Soldier 17's imagination, this moment of uncontrolled groundlessness might be unlivable. His projected male would 'rather be dead' than to face not homosexuality itself but release from the 'compulsory denial of the *unknowability*, of the arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness, of homo/heterosexual definition' that Sedgwick argues is a requirement of 'men's accession to heterosexual entitlement'.<sup>12</sup>

In his discussion of Sedgwick's theory of homosexual panic, Paul Kelleher identifies her 'counterintuitive claim' that homophobia may have preceded 'anything resembling a modern conception of "homosexuality"'. He infers a reversal of the 'repressive hypothesis' that would conventionally account for anti-homosexual sentiment, instead identifying a dynamic whereby homophobia requires but also paradoxically 'anticipates and solicits the homosexual embodiment it ostensibly wishes left unconceived'.<sup>13</sup> Understood as a (homophobic) incitement to (homosexual) discourse in the Foucauldian sense, Kelleher reads Sedgwick's theory to upset the logic that would otherwise define an authentic or essentialised homosexual embodiment—the 'original', as it were, to which certain expressions of homophobia might be an imitative 'copy'. Singing and dancing 'in a female/homosexual way' might be such an expression, apparently mimicking the natural (and naturally 'female') 'way' of homosexual men. But if this performance can be staged as 'naturally' by heterosexual men as by homosexual men—if 'this' can be 'so gay' as to produce a fatal case of homosexual panic—then certain homophobic acts of homosocial bonding and certain embodiments of homosexuality might *look*, as Sedgwick claims, if not *be*, 'startlingly' similar.<sup>14</sup> Inversely, if *both* performances are acknowledged as imitations, where no natural or original embodiment is or ever was discernible, then the panic behind the homophobia of acting 'in a female/homosexual

way’—the panic that may have led to Private Kovco accidentally shooting himself, but certainly led to his roommates remaining silent on the incident—correlates to the panic of groundlessness that Butler identifies in heterosexuality’s ‘incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization’.<sup>15</sup>

When the report of the military inquiry was eventually released in December 2006, its principal finding was that Private Kovco had died accidentally as a result of his own ‘inappropriate handling of his personal weapon’.<sup>16</sup> Hoping to avoid further political fallout from its own arguably inappropriate handling of the case in earlier months, the Defence Department chose to release the report late on a busy news day; it claimed this was to prevent any more speculation. The report was partly able to perform this function by finally ruling out murder or suicide as explanations for Kovco’s death, but an unusual choice of word from a leaked copy of the report had already begun to circulate in media coverage as a curious shorthand for the behavioural circumstances of the shooting. The inquiry found that Kovco had been engaging in ‘skylarking’ behaviour at the time of the shooting.<sup>17</sup> The immediate popularity of this word in media sources speaks partly to the sound-bite phenomenon of news reporting, where more complex details of a story might be summarised in a catchy colloquialism such as this. In fact, the wording of the report suggests that ‘skylarking’ was used during the inquiry in this same way, as shorthand for ‘inappropriate handling of the SLP [self-loading pistol]’.<sup>18</sup> That ‘skylarking’ is a somewhat outmoded term would also have contributed to the curiosity that surrounded its citation in news reports.

To my reading, however, the euphemistic function of the word ‘skylarking’ invites more curiosity than questions of its currency or its convenience as shorthand. It is curious, for instance, that after initial media reports, no further mention seems to have been made of Soldier 17’s statement that Kovco and colleagues were behaving ‘in a female/homosexual way’. No reference to this phrase is made in the inquiry report, even though it appears to describe a central component of the ‘skylarking’ in question. Instead, the report states that Kovco was ‘singing in a falsetto whilst exposing his testicles, in humour, to [his roommates]’, details which also received very little media attention.<sup>19</sup> As a much-repeated catchphrase, then, ‘skylarking’ stands in for all of the above behavioural contexts but also works to conceal the homophobia inherent in this behaviour and Soldier 17’s description of it. In this way, homophobia is reinforced as insignificant and unworthy of concern either in regard to the circumstances of Kovco’s death or the attitudes of military personnel.

What I have been describing as the panic of governmental and some media responses to Kovco’s death is markedly different from the relative lack of coverage given to numerous recent instances of bastardisation and suicide in the Australian military, some of which are related to equally concealed homophobia, racism or other abuse reportedly perpetrated by victims’ colleagues. Certainly, nothing approaching the call to national mourning and the

celebration of mutual pride that followed the death of Private Kovco has honoured these deaths. In such cases, claim the families of victims, the government has failed to adequately recognise the impact of these deaths, just as the military failed to adequately recognise the suffering and grievances of victims prior to their eventual suicide.<sup>20</sup>

If claims such as these are to be believed, a picture emerges of the military stabilising its identity through concealed processes of exclusion. To offer a different metaphor, the integrity of the military body depends upon the successful abjection of contaminants, particularly those performances of gender and sexuality that might be feared to threaten stability and cohesion. Ethnographic work carried out in the British military by John Hockey makes similar observations about the necessary limitation of risk, especially the condemnation of reckless individual or 'hero' behaviour, in order to maintain an integral *esprit de corps*, even if the machismo of such behaviour might appear at least consistent with wider military culture.<sup>21</sup> As Hockey continues, a significant part of this culture is the violent, sexually charged and alcohol-fuelled behaviours that constitute 'narratives of release from duty'.<sup>22</sup> To isolate individual, aberrant behaviour as a threat is to avoid having to hold accountable the larger group from which it emerged and from which it purportedly diverged. To conclude that Private Kovco's death resulted only from his own 'skylarking' and not from, say, that of his roommates, or indeed from a wider culture of 'skylarking' among his contingent, is to avoid having to consider questions of recklessness or lack of safety—or worse—that might pertain to the military as a whole. Presumably, the wish expressed by Kovco's widow to have the word 'skylarking' removed from the inquiry findings reflects a desire not to have her husband held solely and recklessly responsible.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, I'm also arguing that the word 'skylarking' functions to *absolve* Kovco of responsibility—at least for the kind of behaviour that accidentally resulted in his death, if not for his death itself—by virtue of the social sanctions which continually excuse and even mandate homophobia and homosexual panic. In her own discussion of her earlier theorisation of homosexual panic, Sedgwick identifies the politics of responsibility which led her to the term:

The forensic use of the 'homosexual panic' defense for gay-bashers depends on the medically mediated ability of the phrase to obscure an overlap between individual pathology and systemic function. The reason I found the term attractive was quite the opposite: I thought I could dramatize, render visible, even render scandalous the same space of overlap.<sup>24</sup>

Sedgwick here alludes to the scandal of a legal defence that many times exonerated the perpetrator of a violent crime on the grounds that the victim, usually another male, had propositioned him sexually. The perpetrator's resulting and apparently reasonable 'panic' would be enough to absolve him of legal and moral responsibility, effectively holding the



victim responsible for his own death or injury by figuring him as predatory and uncontrollably sexual. Similarly, the individualising Freudian pathology from which the defence (and Sedgwick's theory) gets its name wilfully underestimates the socially structured nature of homophobia not just to excuse but to produce certain kinds of male homosocial interactions. The euphemistic concealment enacted by the repetition of the word 'skylarking' partakes of this structure, disavowing the ambiguities within the culture of homosociality on which the military depends. And while it holds Kovco solely responsible for his own death by questioning his adherence to safety procedures, it conveniently obscures the overlap between one man's behaviour when released from duty and the wider sense of gender duty to which he and his colleagues were still very much committed.

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On returning to Sedgwick's discussion of homosexual panic in *Between Men* some twenty years after this book's publication and in the context of thinking about military culture and the war in Iraq, I am struck by a particular choice of words. The state of continuous, binding panic among all but homosexually identified men is, she writes, 'a structural residue of *terrorist potential* ... of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia'.<sup>25</sup> A number of readings of this highly charged phrase are worth considering. Most explicitly, as we have seen, Sedgwick is arguing for the '*blackmailability*' of Western maleness: that as part of a pervasive, structural homophobia, non-homosexually identified men must remain constantly vigilant not to be perceived as homosexual. Moreover, to reiterate, much of the terrorising force of this panic resides in the 'correspondences and similarities' between many forms of intimate male bonding that characterise *both* prescribed embodiments of masculinity and 'reprobated forms of homosexual sociality'.<sup>26</sup> As I'm arguing the reported circumstances of the Kovco shooting elucidate, terror also animates the ongoing threat that the stable ground of heterosexual entitlement manufactured by the compulsory concealment and denial of these overlaps might give way at any time.

We have also seen that Sedgwick adds the potential for violence as a further element of the threat posed by the blackmail that shadows male homosocial bonds. Considering the threat of violence, the 'terrorist potential' of homosexual panic comes closer, at least in a conventional understanding, to popular discourses of terrorism that currently circulate in the West. But as many writers have noted in recent times, what counts as terrorism and who counts as a terrorist (or indeed who is suspected of 'terrorist potential', to use Sedgwick's phrase slightly differently) are questions which must attend to ideological perspective. Judith Butler, for instance, interrogates the naming of terrorism within the context of the United States's post-9/11 foreign policy and its unilateral interventions into international law. She writes that:

the framework for conceptualizing global violence is such that 'terrorism' becomes the name to describe the violence of the illegitimate, whereas legal war becomes the prerogative of those who can assume international recognition as legitimate states.<sup>27</sup>

In drawing attention to these semiotic distinctions, Butler is exposing what may be described as 'correspondences and similarities' among international acts of aggression, otherwise concealed and denied, and that these constitute a continuum of global violence rather than a binary structure of easy determinations of legality and justification. The ability to fix significations of vocabulary and law, and the exploitation of them to justify certain global actions, are evidence of a self-styled sense of entitlement maintained hegemonically if not coercively by such 'legitimate states'.

By bringing together these two conceptions of 'terrorist potential', I am not arguing that the current US-led military coalition should be branded a terrorist group or that its 'war on terror' is itself a form of terrorism. Nor am I wishing to categorise in any way the masculinity or maleness of terrorism or to comment on the potential of masculine people (male or otherwise) to be terrorists. As Jasbir K. Puar outlines, some accounts of terrorism draw over-simplified causal connections between the dynamics and activities of terrorist organisations and the intensities of masculine sexuality and psychology.<sup>28</sup> Rather, I am interested to analyse some of the contradictions and overlaps within hegemonic constructions of entitlement and legitimacy, especially heterosexual masculine entitlement as it relates to national legitimacy. I am aiming to pose the following questions: In what ways is the assumption of recognition as a 'legitimate state' identified by Butler analogous to the accession to heterosexual masculine entitlement theorised by Sedgwick? Particularly where the military culture of the United States, Australia and others relies upon metonymic embodiments of homosocial and homosexually panicked masculinity, is the violence of these nations' military interventions also characteristic of a panicked ambiguity in their manufacture of legitimacy? Asked differently, how can a reading of the recuperative work around the circumstances of Private Kovco's death be used to 'dramatize, render visible, even render scandalous' the obscured overlap between individual responsibility and 'systemic function' in relation to both homosexual panic and nationalist hegemonies?

Butler also comments on what I have called the politics of responsibility in relation to ideological framings of terrorism. In addition to the semiotic control that 'legitimate states' exercise to justify their own acts of violence, she notes that the strategy of telling the story of 'personal pathology' behind terrorist acts 'works as a plausible and engaging narrative in part because it resituates agency in terms of a subject, something we can understand, something that accords with our idea of personal responsibility'.<sup>29</sup>

Much like the diversion tactic behind the 'homosexual panic defence', pathologisation of individual terrorist-subjects disavows the greater threat posed by the organisational structure

or 'systemic function' of dispersed terrorist networks. Singling out and providing explanations for the acts of individual terrorists limits 'terrorist potential' to those who appear to fit the pathological profile, the terms of which serve to confirm particular norms of gender performance, family relations, appropriate expressions of faith, and so forth, that contribute to cultural hegemonies within 'legitimate states'.

Puar and Rai observe a similar phenomenon at work in Western representations of terrorists, and in particular note overlaps between constructions of terrorism and discourses of sexuality and sexual perversity. They argue that current academic knowledge of terrorism 'has a history that ties the image of the modern terrorist to a much older figure, the racial and sexual monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'. Building on ideas of 'failed heterosexuality, Western notions of the psyche' and the trope of 'queer monstrosity', the figure of the 'terrorist-monster-fag' is constructed in service of the current context of normalising 'aggressive heterosexual patriotism'.<sup>30</sup> As evidence, Puar and Rai cite racialised and sexualised images of retaliation that followed the September 11 attacks, including a street poster in New York City depicting a caricatured Osama bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building. The clear subtext, they argue, is that 'American retaliation promises to emasculate bin Laden and turn him into a fag'.<sup>31</sup> The broader discursive effect, however, beyond constructing an identifiable 'terrorist' enemy-other, is to 'normalize and discipline a population through these very monstrous figures' of queer deviancy especially as it intersects with racial otherness. In short, 'if you're not for the war, you're a fag'.<sup>32</sup>

More fundamentally than on the basis of semiotics or semantics alone, the legitimization of violent nationalist interventions by the United States and its current allies depends upon the 'blackmailability' of patriotic subjects via the 'terrorist potential' of a hegemonic system of gendered, sexualised and racialised representation. As the spearhead of nationalist imperatives, militarism (and particularly military interventions framed as defensive or retaliatory) works to forcibly stabilise these constructions of national identity through both the Othering of what Puar and Rai call 'monstrous' enemy-subjects and the correlative disciplining of the national population via patriotic panic. Metonymically, the pervasion of homosexual panic within the military aims to ensure idealised embodiments of gender and sexuality (and, we could add, race) such that bodies accede to unmarked heterosexual masculine entitlement only by disavowing both the necessary performative labour required to produce such a subject position, and the ambiguities and contradictions inherent within it.

It is not enough to say, then, that the heterosexually entitled masculine body that emblematises nationalism and militarism is the central figure against which the 'terrorist-monster-fag' is imagined. More than this, the two operate analogically, fulfilling equivalent roles within respective structures. If this is the case, it may not be too much to say that Puar and Rai's Orientalised and psychosexualised 'terrorist-monster-fag', rooted in eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century figures of monstrosity, has significant discursive overlaps with those figures of 'paranoid Gothic' literature through which Sedgwick arrives at her theory of homosexual panic. As Sedgwick summarises, novels of the genre such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* are especially pertinent to such analysis by tending to feature 'a male hero [who] is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his "double", to whom he seems to be mentally transparent'.<sup>33</sup> These dynamics continue to structure how we narrate patriarchal rivalries in many fields, including corporate business and international politics, not least the paranoid, self-ignorant pursuit of Saddam Hussein by two presidents Bush. And so it may not be too much, either, to imagine Jake Kovco written into the thankless role of tragic hero of that modern-day paranoid Gothic narrative, an emblematic figure of nationalist masculinity whose construction coercively locked him into 'an epistemologically indissoluble clench of will and desire' with his unknown terrorist-monster-fag double.<sup>34</sup>

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In a number of ways that are familiar from other military conflicts of the last two decades, the current war in Iraq conforms to a new order of visibility and mediatisation that many theorists have analysed as reconfiguring existing notions of witness and participation, distance and presence. In addition to considering the effects of war-as-spectacle on armchair viewers at home, the over-produced visibility of Iraq needs to be understood in terms of political tactics. Judith Butler analyses the self-proclaimed 'overwhelming visual phenomenon' of the United States government's 'shock and awe' strategy against Iraq in this way, as:

a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think ... not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, whose senses are supposed to be done in by this spectacle, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN or Fox.<sup>35</sup>

Contributing to the effects of the *visibility* of war are various controls of the *visibility* of war. One control phenomenon whose tactics and ethics have been the subject of much critical and political discussion is the selective witness of 'embedded journalism', not new to the current Iraq war but perhaps cast into greater relief in conjunction with other perceived governmental manipulations of knowledge and information before and during this war. In the view of Douglas Kellner, well known for his work on the media spectacle of earlier wars, 'it was clear that the embedded reporters were indeed "in bed with" their military escorts' from the outset, presenting 'exultant and triumphant accounts that trumped any paid propagandist'.<sup>36</sup> Kellner's description of 'embedded reporting' recalls the hegemonic if not coercive relations between military commanders and subordinate personnel, of which the suspicious silence and selective witness of Jake Kovco's roommates may have been a direct

product. Parallel chains of command figure these soldiers as 'embedded' witnesses in this sense. Moreover, metaphorical implications of being 'in bed with' other subjects of the respective hegemonic structure echo the constant potential for overlaps of kinds of homosocial bonding which Sedgwick argues require systemic concealment.

At the time of writing, dissatisfaction still surrounded official government explanations of Kovco's death, and a coronial inquiry was under way. His widow, Shelley Kovco, sought simply to have the death ruled an accident, without any implication of irresponsibility. His mother, Judy Kovco, was more vocal in her opposition to the military inquiry findings:

'I want them to stand up and tell the damn truth and they're not doing it,' she said. 'You've got boys in the room who are saying they saw nothing—absolute rubbish, rubbish ... There is no way known nobody saw a thing, it's too convenient.'<sup>37</sup>

As satisfying as it might be to know who pulled the trigger of Kovco's pistol and why, and who in fact saw the shooting, my argument has been that this line of investigation represents a diversion away from investigating the 'systemic function' of a number of factors which will continue to hinder categorical knowability *per se* within cultures of militarism and hegemonic masculinity, namely entrenched homophobia within fields of homosociality and the layers of disavowal and concealment that pass these behaviours off as less than homophobic.

In developing her theory of homosexual panic, Sedgwick aimed to 'render scandalous' some of these layers, particularly where they work to isolate and even excuse individual behaviour which should otherwise be understood as reinforcing cultural hegemonies of gender and sexuality. If we were to believe the government's initial explanation of Kovco's shooting, the gun just went off. For some, including Judy Kovco, it may seem scandalous that after months of official investigation, this explanation remained essentially unchallenged. But rather than simply hoping to explain freak accidents for which no one can be held accountable, the familiar involuntarism behind the excuse 'the gun just went off' is a more fundamental, even systemic, feature of the politics of responsibility around certain masculine identities and, in particular, the hydraulic image of male sexuality. Explaining sexual ejaculation as an involuntary mechanism allows males to be excused of any psychic or emotional involvement in the expression of corporeal urges, in turn providing, among other things, a partial and less threatening explanation for homosexual behaviour among non-homosexually identified men in circumstances of same-sex confinement.<sup>38</sup>

The disavowal behind reports that had Kovco's gun 'just going off' is a closely related absolution of responsibility in the service of heterosexual masculine stabilisation, not because Kovco was engaging in homosexual behaviour that needed to be concealed but because heterosexual masculine entitlement needs to conceal any acknowledgment of potential overlaps between homosexual and homosocial. The government's panicked misreporting of

the circumstances of Kovco's death and mistreatment of his body might in themselves be considered scandalous. But what remains scandalously unacknowledged is the structural role of homophobia in this case; its ongoing erasure and normalisation are surely real reasons to panic.

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