At this hour, the fictional country is still, and twelve men glide through the dark into a cotton field. As they cross through the woods with their parachutes into a rehearsal of war, one might remind the other men to move like vapor, quoting T. E. Lawrence, who instructed his soldiers to be “a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas.” The Green Berets-in-training have landed in Pineland, an imaginary country created by the U.S. military, which encompasses the forests, barns, and towns of fifteen central North Carolina counties. In this scene, the Green Berets are training for one of their key missions: the backing and covert training of overseas guerilla units to overthrow their own governments and replace them with governments congenial to U.S. interests. 

Spanning nearly ten thousand square miles, Pineland is studded with hunting and tackle shops; little greasy spoons serving chicken and dumplings where you can pay with don (the fake currency used during training exercises); and farmland volunteered by patriotic locals for meet-up points. Here, too, is a shifty and uneasy porosity between the simulated and the real: once a woman ran out of her house, carrying a hog-leg revolver aimed at the training soldiers, who thought she was going to
“shoot them dead on the spot”—but it turned out she was someone’s grandmother and just wanted to join the war game with an unloaded gun.

Since 1952, the U.S. Army has trained for irregular warfare in various iterations. Dating back to 1974 in its current North Carolina location, Pineland is sometimes called “the Monkey Bars of the Special Forces,” and it is used for a wide range of training units and predeployment exercises. Its narratives are continuously resculpted to resemble the war of the hour, moving from Cold War idioms to more recent focuses on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Pineland has room, a military thinker involved in crafting predeployment training scenarios told me, “for anything you could want, every crazy thing that is happening in the real world.”

Six to eight times a year, more than one hundred trainees enter Pineland for Robin Sage, the culminating exercise of the Special Forces Qualification Course (or the “Q Course”), training their bodies and imaginations for Unconventional Warfare. These Green Berets-in-training prepare for war by training others, individuals who role-play guerillas learning to overthrow Pineland’s government with covert U.S. backing. At the time of my fieldwork (2011–2013), the role-players who acted out guerillas and various other opponents and allies in training scenarios were a varied group. Among them were Iraqis, many of them recent war migrants who worked as interpreters and contractors for the American military during the 2003–2011 Iraq War. Salaried for their labors, they repetitively acted out the contingencies of war for the training soldiers. Alongside them were many other role-playing contractors, some retired military and others civilians from nearby North Carolina counties, many aware of Pineland since childhood. More recent literature describing Robin Sage notes that “SFOC [Special Forces Operations Command] students . . . serve as members of the guerilla force” as part of the training (Woytowich 2016, 2). An economy of Arabic-speaking role-players still persists across other military trainings throughout the United States. Unlike much of recent war literature’s focus on the lives of soldiers, this book animates the positions and worlds of Iraqi role-players, many of whom have arrived in recent decades from Iraq and have remained within war’s theater. As role-players, they inhabit war’s simulacra, employed to fight, bargain, weep, and die—like adversaries or allies—in the warzone,
as they both maneuver and are maneuvered through Empire’s complicated terrain. Logics that animate that terrain, crafted in policy circles on high, are variably enacted by military operators on the ground. Here is one scene of that larger story, among others also spanning a range of military sites to soon follow: the village rises into form between the pines.

Pineland is decorated to conjure the Middle East. Imagine collapsible houses full of prayer rugs and fake bullets, a market, and a lit mosque with its candied-looking blue dome, a tiny glow in the forest. The key sites are labeled in Arabic: Mustashfā (Hospital), Maqbarah (Cemetery), Sūq (Market), with Arabic graffiti scrawled on flimsy buildings and upon bright cloths cinched around trees, an attempt to import the urban into the woods: Allāhu Akbar, cries the forest. The Iraqi role-players have changed from jeans into traditional costume: kūfiyyahs for the men and long robes and headscarves for the women. Gone now is the man who owned his own shop in Baghdad and speaks three languages; gone is the woman who once worked in an NGO and wore a hijab only during the war. Also erased: the guy who was in medical school during the war, became an around-the-clock volunteer and translator at the hospital, was threatened by the militia and fled for his life; and the man who writes beautiful short stories, is interested in mysticism, and tells great jokes. Instead, each person is slotted into the role of Proxy Soldier or Insurgent or Mourning Mother. In these woods, there are chickens and goats and scripts; a warehouse with bins labeled “Cultural Clothing”; and a knife prepared with fake blood, a prop to stand for the eye-for-an-eye “local justice.” Canisters of dry ice manufacture billowing smoke to provide obscurity in battle. The “Wound Kits” are ready. The “Crying Room” is ready, as are the throats of the “Criers.” If the training soldiers fail, they are punished: measuring and digging mock graves for those who fell. The “Notionally Dead,” who must write their own eulogies by twilight during a training exercise, lie shirtless by the fire in a clearing in the woods. Around the villages, the vast expanse of Pineland extends: the towering loblollies and longleaf pines, then the cotton fields, sandy soil and pastures, the beekeepers, the vineyards, the hog farms, and beyond them the gas stations, burger joints, churches, and Walmarts.

The world of Pinelandia is conjured here across multiple registers. As both an anthropologist and a poet, I draw on ethnographic description
and mimetic enactment, via poetry. This text complements my recent ethnographic collection of poetry, *Kill Class* (Tupelo Press, 2019), and draws on excerpts from it between each chapter. I call these interludes “Field poems,” borrowing the name from Leah Zani (2019b) but with some different valences and interpretations in the category. The book’s epilogue delves into how poetry rises to meet anthropology, conjuring the specific spatial and temporal and textural universe of Pinelandia, while also thinking through how aesthetics can meet ethics and politics in such representations. I deliberately offer this analysis afterwards, as the work with poetry I seek to accomplish is performative and experiential: an activation of phenomenological experience itself. Ultimately, I summon craft-tools and form (like poetic structure, sonics, linebreak, and syntax) as a way to *do a scene*, rather than say it.

[Field Poem]: What Is Growing in These Woods

Green in here, gleaming
like being inside a fable
with stalls of fruit you can’t eat.
To go home, leave crumbs.
When the wood circles you
back here instead, let the lost
and the impossible ripen
in you, ripen and go.

This book begins about a decade into the post 9-11 Global War on Terror (GWOT) launched by the United States. It zooms in on Iraq in particular, a country profoundly harmed by American imperial interests and occupation for decades. American Empire is the stage-set here, through the specific optics of the 2003–2011 Iraq War. The war trainings described herein seem to assume an indefinite duration of the War on Terror—the war that is “the very definition of normality itself” (Chow 2010, 9)—adapting readily between different wars and conflicts. During my fieldwork, I observed trainings depicting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are additional trainings that forge spaces for “hybrid adversaries”
and sites described as “Other Than America” (OTA), as well as the flexible Military Operations on Urban Terrain (MOUT) and virtual reality simulations, which can be used for domestic unrest in the United States, as militarism also turns inward. Amidst the fraught withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover in August 2021, President Biden offered in a speech: “This decision about Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan. It’s about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries.” Perhaps, however, the United States’ relationship to “forever war” and Empire has simply shifted into new forms, as drone strikes persist both in Afghanistan and across the Middle East, and direct action operations also persist, often without acknowledgment or media coverage. The training spaces of war in this book shine a light on broader transnational histories of Empire, tracing the contours of Empire within the United States. They also tell a story of the shattered landscapes of Iraqis—the fragmented diaspora of Iraq that is also the painful aftermath of Empire and war, delving specifically into the complex and often fraught lifeworlds and commitments of Iraqis who worked for the U.S. military first in Iraq as interpreters or contractors, and then in the United States as cultural role-players. This story shines a light on both those who work within and for Empire during wartime and the often devastating costs—reprisals at home for those who cannot leave Iraq—right at a moment when the world witnessed the abandonment of U.S.-affiliated interpreters in Afghanistan.

These simulations are also part of a fantasy of cultural translation in wartime, imagined as a panacea and antidote to conflict as well as a space where affect is used as a tactic. Qualitatively different from many other spaces of war preparedness, which focus particularly on strategy (such as the tabletop war game), live action role-playing games reveal another genre entirely. These games are unnervingly intimate in their focus on the everyday, but also eerily distancing in their outcome—spaces where a mobilized “cultural encounter” is already fraught with misrecognition and violence.

At the height of the 2003–2011 Iraq War, Major General Robert Scales, one of the authors of the Counterinsurgency doctrine, wrote in the Armed Forces Journal, “Understanding and empathy will be important weapons of war” (2006). Conversely, this fieldwork marks the practice’s violences
and orientalism, their spaces of rupture. These simulations also offer another iteration in a long history of the entanglement between militarism and “culture” and the “human sciences,” grazing from the side anthropology’s dangerous history with the state. In this history, cultural knowledge has long danced with conflict, from anthropology’s colonial beginnings, through World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the present (see Kelly et al. 2010; González 2009; Price 2004, 2008, 2016). Many anthropologists have decried the ethics and politics of the militarization of culture, as well as its inseparability from counterterrorism and targeting (Forte 2011; Gregory 2008; Kelly et al. 2010), but the military’s practices have meanwhile prompted an uneasy reflexivity: anthropology, having itself emerged out of the colonial encounter, practiced epistemological techniques that were alarmingly similar to the military’s, such as participant observation as a means of gaining information, and the practice of “rapport”—albeit for the vastly different end of producing scholarship. Meanwhile, the tool of cultural knowledge, framed as benign and humanitarian by the military and media—and in some sense an extension of peacetime activities like Area Studies programs (Chow 2010) became part of a logic of unending war. Indeed, as national security studies conversations veer towards “near peer competition” with Russia and China and away from centering GWOT, new Area Studies programs are developing.

To this end, this book in part seeks to make strange the larger American project of unending war. Thereby, I counter a trend in the anthropology of militarism that often accepts that permanent war framing, focusing on detailed attention to military practices and programs rather than interrogating why these programs exist. Ultimately, this kind of commitment to war (and American invasion or other forms of wartime presence as a practice) is too often normalized and must be made as strange as the surreal world of the mock villages. Further, this larger American project of unending war suggests a potentially enduring space for at least variations of the trainings and performances described herein: trainings fantasized by the military and media alike of producing cross-cultural understanding and communication, but which ultimately reify difference and stereotypes. To be clear: this book is not proposing that such exercises should be “improved” or made more “authentic,” but rather critiques their core logics as well as the indefinite wars that produce them.
A range of different iterations of these trainings populates the landscape of American war, which bears a long history of military and civil defense simulations, many with racializing subtext to their architectures or narratives. During World War II, replicas were constructed of Berlin tenements and Japanese rice-paper houses, so that they could be razed. At the time of the Cold War’s Operation Cue (1955), suburbs including mannequins were obliterated during nuclear simulations. During the Vietnam War amidst an emphasis on a “hearts and minds” campaign and a revived focus on guerilla warfare, role-players became more central to training practices—though American soldiers themselves most frequently played guerillas. In the subsequent years, more permanent Combat Training Centers (CTCs) were created as spaces to rehearse war—from the National Training Center (1979) to the Joint Readiness Training Center (1987), alongside a range of virtual training programs. CTCs and their widespread use of “cultural role-players” within them ballooned after 9-11.

Pineland itself both long precedes and extends beyond the GWOT. The fictional land is the province of Special Operations Forces (SOF) and, in particular, the Green Berets (also known as the Special Forces), the military body most focused on training cultural literacy. Speaking of the realm of SOF, General Ray Odierno, former chief of staff of the Army, elaborated: “Conflict is a human endeavor, ultimately won or lost in the Human Domain” (Woytowich 2016, 34). However, after operations began in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military’s General Purpose Forces became increasingly focused on irregular warfare and counterinsurgency (COIN): employing Middle Eastern role-players as a training tactic burgeoned for both the conventional forces and the SOF. That is, two qualitatively different but related modes were evolving on the ground: on the one hand, Special Operations Forces COIN operations were being trained and honed; and on the other hand, there was a devolution of COIN principles to all soldiering across unit and specialty.

As for the conventional forces, in 2003 both the National Training Center at Fort Irwin and Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk launched “Iraq Rotations,” hiring hundreds of Iraqi role-players to reinact Iraq. By 2009, ten training rotations were conducted and fifty thousand soldiers trained annually at each Combat Training Center (Pickup 2010). Afghanistan Rotations likewise escalated in this period. Meanwhile, the
training of Green Berets increased after 2002, and cultural role-players were hired. Both sets of trainings were in full swing in 2011 when I began twenty-six continuous months of fieldwork, and several years of follow-up trips, across four military bases and one military training academy in the United States, interviewing military personnel (architects of the war games, contractors, soldiers in training) and Iraqi role-players, as well as occasionally being cast in the games myself. In the years prior, I lived in New York and made regular trips to Jordan as I got to know many Iraqis in diaspora. In this period, my interest in the complex plight of diasporic Iraqis who had worked for the American military or companies during the 2003–2011 Iraq War sparked this subsequent work.

From 2011 through 2013, I continued to make fieldtrips to Amman to stay in contact with Iraqis there. Eventually, the project landed within one particular world: Iraqis who had initially worked with the Americans during the 2003–2011 Iraq War (as interpreters, contractors, drivers, or host nation interlocutors of any kind) and later as role-players in the United States. The project took me through diasporic Iraqi communities, between Amman, New York, Washington, DC, Louisiana, North Carolina, and California, as well as military bases around the United States. Follow-up trips occurred in 2014 and 2015.

These conversations took place as the 2003–2011 Iraq War was officially ending (but still felt intensely proximate), and when the military's focus on culture—also known as the Cultural Turn—remained in full-swing but was no longer at its height, with its origins in recent memory.

We return now to the Green Berets landing in the dark, in the soft furl of mist. Tonight, the student-soldiers are practicing Unconventional Warfare, a stage of war that might be considered part of “Left of Bang.” Left of Bang, as well as Left of Beginning and Left of Zero, generally designate, in the war lexicon, the period prior to official conflict or “before tensions turn violent” (Flynn, Sisco, and Ellis 2012, 13). As one former infantry captain explains it: “If you were to picture a timeline, ‘bang’ is time-zero and is in the middle of the line. Bang is whatever event you are trying to prevent from occurring. . . . Left of Bang is not just a point on an
abstract timeline, but a state of mind that requires we reexamine situational awareness” (Van Horne 2014, 28). Most Left of Bang strategies seek to eliminate sanctuaries for Department of Defense adversaries without actually declaring full-on war, for example, through development and stabilization operations, training foreign security forces (all part of Special Operations purview) or sending U.S. civilian rather than military agencies into conflict areas. Within American national security logics, Left of Bang acts as a potential circumvention, reconfiguration, or muting of the bang itself.

The case of Unconventional Warfare (one of the provinces of the Green Berets since their inception in 1952) is perhaps the sharpest example of attempting to mute or reconfigure the bang: in its classic incarnation, the U.S. Army enters denied territory, secretly trains a handpicked group of indigenous guerillas, and then outsources the bang to them. More broadly, the Special Operations Forces (of which the Green Berets are a part, alongside Civil Operations and Military Information Support Operations) were trained in the culture of their allies and adversaries to create moments of affective connection with the locals in order to less obtrusively obtain operationally relevant information. Urged to take the edge off their presence, they dressed like locals and grew their beards—described as “tactical beards” by some—for their deployments. Another iteration of a strategic “softer” approach manifested during the Vietnam War in the “hearts and minds” programs—the strategy of appealing to emotions and reason to sway a population. Early challenges in counterinsurgency efforts were described as hindered by a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture and inadequate language skills. Indeed, the foundation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program, jointly administered by the South Vietnamese government and the U.S. Military Assistance Command, was driven by the new focus on a hearts and minds approach as well as an urgency around supplying cultural and ethnographic intelligence to the troops.

In recent years, these trends took on new iterations: after 9-11 and amidst the 2003–2011 Iraq War, the U.S. military—in various ways, across different branches—framed the Counterinsurgency doctrine in part as a softer approach, lauding the beginning of the “Cultural Turn.” The Cultural Turn might be read as part of military humanism—the
entwinement of humanitarian interventionism and liberal imperialism (Chomsky 2008; DiPrizio 2002), which, although “dressed up in the cloak of humanitarian morality” (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, 22), is no less war. Senior counterinsurgency advisor to General David Petraeus, David Kilcullen, described counterinsurgency as “armed social work,” (Gregory 2008, 13) and soldiers were charged with understanding the “human terrain,” “the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic, and political elements among whom a force is fighting” (Kipp, Grau, Prinslow, Smith 2006, 9; see also McFate 2005, for the earliest development of the concept) precipitating the widespread development of cultural trainings for deploying soldiers and the hiring of anthropologists to embed on Human Terrain Teams to supply soldiers with cultural knowledge in the warzone. In an echo of practices long used by the Green Berets, conventional soldiers were trained in cultural knowledge and in the making of rapport—albeit in a far more programmatic and less agile manner than their predecessors. At its height under the command of General David Petraeus, the Counterinsurgency doctrine was criticized and largely fell out of fashion. In 2015, Foreign Affairs, a journal that had previously published articles supporting the Counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq, noted that the strategy was doomed: “The blame lies not with poor implementation but with the strategy itself” (Jeffrey 2015).29

Nonetheless, tendencies from this period persist in other forms. More recently, President Obama regularly emphasized lightening America’s footprint through the use of drone warfare and proxy armies—progressions that point to something like James Der Derian’s ethically ambiguous “virtuous war,” an antiseptic mode where killing is separated from dying (2009).31 While not explicitly espousing the same logic and making for a far louder and bombastic presence, President Trump, meanwhile, radically expanded the use of both drone warfare and Special Operations Forces. These trends all point towards the recent attempts to reframe war’s violence (the so-called bang) and make it less visible—or indeed, rather, less felt within America’s shores—in part by outsourcing it to non-American bodies, both machine and human.32 These attempts to stage a diminished global imprint, of course, coexist uneasily alongside rising American participation in wars and conflict around the world, including the war in Afghanistan (2001–2021), the Iraq surge (2007), the Afghan surge
(2009), Libya (2011), and more recently, reinvigorated involvement in Iraq and Syria (2014–), as well as escalated U.S. military counterterrorism involvement (and, in particular, drone strikes) in a range of nonbattlefield settings (2015–), such as Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. After Donald Trump came into power, these conflicts escalated further and the United States itself became more militarized towards its own citizens. Under President Biden, the shape of this arc remains to be seen. Amidst withdrawal from Afghanistan and the country’s full-scale collapse to the Taliban (2021)—and thus the overall decrease of the military’s global footprint—drone strikes both in Afghanistan and around the Middle East persist, as well as a commitment to counterterrorism missions across the region and an ongoing commitment to the war on terror.33

Meanwhile, to laud any of these “softer” and/or smaller footprint approaches as a way forward is to conceal their violence. Counterinsurgency’s logics are driven by both an essentialized notion of the Other and a weaponized version of culture. Indeed, more darkly, the so-called humanization and “application of liberal precepts” of this mode of warfare have further “legitimated war making as a political intervention” (Khalili 2012, 3).34 In their Unconventional Warfare trainings, the soldiers’ enactment of Left of Bang is hushed as they covertly slip into Pineland, court potential partners to overthrow Pineland’s regime, and work to replace it with a government congenial to U.S. interests. A major who develops training simulations as well as supervises teams on the ground tells me: “the pine and the pin pass weapons here.” The “pin,” a metonym for the soldier himself, deflects us into the arms of the trees, seeming to erase accountability. That is: it is merely the pin and the pine who pass weapons, not the training soldiers who are using them.

One night in a later phase of the training, I wait with a group of Iraqi role-playing men acting as local guerillas, who will soon be trained in small unit tactics by the American soldiers. We eat dūlmā (onions and eggplants stuffed with lime-infused minced lamb and rice, made by their wives to get them through the long training) in the dark. As the soldiers approach, the pine and the pin pass weapons in a hush; the land just barely creaks, under their boots. They have been preparing to forge relationships, to showcase their cultural attunement. The soldiers are told by the military leadership that when they meet with a guerilla or insurgent
they are seeking to cultivate, they should learn to speak as they speak, watch how they hold their jackets and their hands, and as close as they can, be them—honning “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1973) to set their interlocutors at ease and gain trust. A military psychologist who helps them fine-tune these capacities coaches them after the exercise: “Identify the norm of who you’re talking to and try to echo it. Little tiny things like that: try to blend in with the guys you’re talking to”—that is, render the disturbances of your entry, if possible, less perceptible.

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Amidst a proliferation of macroscopic, geopolitical approaches to Empire in the years after the 2003 American military invasion of Iraq (Wallerstein 2005; Harvey 2003; W.A. Williams 2006; Zinn, Konopacki, and Buhle 2008; McCoy 2009), there have been markedly fewer more granular, microscopic examinations of the topic. Catherine Lutz called for the tools of ethnography to zoom in on and critique the multiplying sites: “the vicissitudes on the ground” (2006, 594), emphasizing the need for ethnographic excavations of imperial coordinates and logics around the globe, including: “U.S. military bases, soldiers on exercises with and training other militaries, and sex-industry and tourist sites frequented by soldiers. It would include U.S.-AID functionaries and operations; cultural diplomacy as enacted through U.S. embassies . . .” (598). The American military’s production and negotiation of difference in its predeployment training exercises offers one such crucial site on the ground. More recently, ethnographic inquiry has begun to fill this void (McGranahan 2010; Simpson 2014; Vine 2015; Dewachi 2017; McGranahan and Collins 2018; Al-Mohammad 2019).

Much recent ethnographic work on the U.S. military and militarism takes the lifeworld of the American soldier as an epistemological entry point. Among this work, essential embodied and phenomenological ethnographic perspectives have turned inward, illuminating the formation and affective entailments of the American soldier amidst the nation’s war-making projects (Macleish 2015; Wool 2015; Wool and Messinger 2012; Finley 2011; Messinger 2010; Kilshaw 2009). Pinelandia conversely posits that a study of American militarism is inextricable from its engage-