This presentation discusses the sensorial and affective registers of U.S imperial warfare and racialized resistance through the work of Iraqi American visual artist Wafaa Bilal. Bilal’s recent performance entitled “…And Counting” spotlights the U.S-led massacre of Iraqi civilians, including his own brother, killed by a drone attack in their hometown of Kufa, Iraq. In the piece, Bilal transforms his body into a canvas by tattooing his back with a borderless map of Iraq covered with small dots for each Iraqi and American casualty near the city where they fell. Bilal’s work exemplifies the formation of what I name a “queer calculus,” where diasporic artists employ their own bodies to map an intimate terrain of human vulnerability and precarity in times of war. A queer calculus of the long war limns the minor affects and senses produced by racialized populations to illumine alternative, more generative modes of sensing and belonging collectively in the world.

Bilal’s embodied performance invites further examination into the CIA’s proliferating use of missile-armed unmanned aerial vehicles, or “drones,” in targeted assassinations across Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. How should we rethink cartographies of violence when air force pilots sit comfortably in Nevada as they fly predator drones in Pakistan thousands of miles away? What does it mean for scholars of American studies and Middle Eastern studies to dwell on the “unmanned” futures of genocide, where decisions of life and death can be resolved in the absence of human interaction? Bilal’s own sensate body in pain, with ink pressed into bare skin, suggests that we might gain intimacy with the histories, geographies, and sentiments of those disappeared by U.S warfare and global security in the form of the tactile and the kinesthetic. Turning to diasporic cultural forms thus allows us to think through the present and future circuits of imperial violence connecting the U.S, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.