As we have seen, American nation-states have forged multiple discursive and physical connections with the bodies of their citizens and subjects since the earliest years of national independence. Ranging from ties imagined as the loose bonds of a voluntary, beneficial association to controls imposed to shackle and dominate a resistant population, the rhetorical and legal connections between American nations and American bodies have been constructed in significantly diverse fashions. Nevertheless, since the nineteenth century, literature in the Americas has repeatedly responded to these intimate associations with a recurring uneasiness regarding the state’s power over the bodies in its charge. Similar concerns appear in texts that celebrate the nation’s relationship with its citizens as well as those that condemn the state’s abuse of its subjects. In both imaginative narratives representing war and political crisis and romances portraying peaceful or idyllic moments of national origin and renewal, the bodies of American citizens and subjects are, time after time, depicted as being in jeopardy, placed at risk by the discursive positions they occupy within the nation as well as the subordinate roles they are forced to adopt within the security structures of the state. Figures not unlike the *homo sacer*, the subject from antiquity at the center of Agamben’s theories of sovereignty, haunt the literature of the Americas from the last two centuries, reduced like William Faulkner’s Rosa Coldfield to the bare life of a near ghost, buried and forgotten like José de Alencar’s Iracema, or assassinated for political activities like Luisa Valenzuela’s Bella. Neither celebrated nor mourned as heroic martyrs or sacrificial victims, such specters of the nation stand...
as ominous reminders of the fragility of the American body and the power of the American state.

Nevertheless, American nations and their agents have not regularly acknowledged the ability and willingness of American states to torture, kill, and disappear those under their authority. Certainly, there have been many exceptions to this broad claim, including explicit threats and implicit warnings. However, even at the height of the political terror during Argentina’s Dirty War, as citizens were regularly disappeared from busy city streets in the middle of the day and as corpses occasionally appeared in public, hanging from bridges or tied to the obelisk in Buenos Aires’ Plaza of the Republic, it was the official stance of the ruling junta that no one was disappeared in Argentina: missing persons had perhaps joined clandestine, Marxist guerrilla organizations, emigrated, or simply vanished from the public eye due to idiosyncratic desires and the vagaries of fate. Indeed, it has largely been the policy of American states, both democratic and dictatorial, to shroud in secrecy or roundly deny the physical threats that their biopolitical principles and practices might pose to the bodies living under their rule.

In the early twenty-first century, U.S. policies associated with the so-called “war on terror” have included a noteworthy shift away from relying exclusively upon such denials and strategies of secrecy. In the name of national security and intelligence gathering, the United States government has repeatedly drawn attention to practices like torture or “enhanced interrogation” and extrajudicial imprisonment or “indefinite detention” as necessary and effective tools in the fight against international terrorism. It is certainly not news that in the United States of America, such practices have occurred since the nation’s founding. It is widely known, for example, that slaves have been tortured, American Indians slaughtered, African Americans lynched, and Japanese Americans imprisoned. It is perhaps somewhat less widely known but still well documented that in more recent decades, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the School of the Americas, and other U.S. federal agencies and institutions have either promoted or tolerated the taking of political prisoners and, particularly but not exclusively abroad, the torturing and killing of political prisoners. Generally, when the state has acknowledged these actions at all, the practices have been labeled the inexcusable behavior of rogue elements or justified as a necessary evil to defeat threats to liberty and democracy. More commonly, the U.S. government has tended to deny that federal agencies have taken or beaten political prisoners inside the United States and to deny knowledge of or association...