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## Bodily States on Screen: Gendering Spheres of Influence in House of Cards

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### Abstract

This article elaborates how the political television drama House of Cards presents the state as a gendered human body, anthropomorphised in the United States' presidential couple Frank and Claire Underwood and Russia's President Viktor Petrov for popular consumption. In an attempt to bring gender into conversation with the concept of sphere of influence, the article shows the tensions between militarist masculinity and queer subjectivity. In House of Cards, the viewer can identify statecraft as mancraft, and see how nonnormative behaviour is written off statecraft. The article focuses on bodily performances as signs of different approaches to power, and argues that House of Cards reinforces a militarised ideal of power over in the everyday practices in and around the White House, as well as in the form of spheres of influence. The series produces a choreography of militarist performance, an imagery which reinforces the understanding of world politics as a terrain for establishing spheres of influence. In the series, spheres of influence become manifest through the exacerbating of patriarchal conduct and centralisation of power, as well as in the premise of building security on the basis of enmities and influence. Sphere of influence, thus, represents a form of masculinised order, pinned against feminised anarchy, leading not only to the subordination of the influenced state, but nonnormative subjectivities, in particular.

## Introduction

This article discusses how gendered states and their spheres of influence are produced in human form by the political television drama of Netflix *House of Cards*. I have chosen a popular culture artefact to look into spheres of influence because it represents states in the form of human bodies, and specifically, gendered bodies for popular consumption. I investigate the ways in which gender relates to different forms of power, and specifically power extended beyond the borders of a sovereign state, by connecting anthropomorphism (state as person) with feminist and queer theory on the gendered performance of the state. I argue that in *House of Cards*, spheres of influence are related to a militarised form of masculinity in which violent solutions are preferred and celebrated.

I focus on season 3 which introduced spheres of influence in the form a US–Russia rivalry in the Middle East. I propose the following: *House of Cards* reproduces gender binaries in terms of power and leadership, which translates to the gendering of the state and its policy of asserting spheres of influence. Even though Frank and Claire Underwood each embody queer subjectivity (more than one sexuality), a binary logic of gender still permeates the understanding of (international) politics in *House of Cards*. Gender here is understood as “a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics” (Sjoberg 2009a, 3) and more specifically, following Judith Butler, as a performance, the action which produces the actor through repetition and naturalisation (Butler 1999). In *House of Cards* manliness is choreographed and performed as the imperturbable and militaristic subject, the natural embodiment of power. The reading of *House of Cards* here adds an important element to the conceptual and empirical work on spheres of influence in this special issue, and elsewhere (Hast 2014), by reading configurations of power in bodily choreographies.

A feminist critique of *power over* proposes that states and people without power of domination have other means available, such as *power to* resist and *power with* others or power as collaboration (Sjoberg 2009b). While power is typically related to the ideas of control, authority or the ability to rule and govern (Staeheli and Kofman 2004, 6), an expanded understanding of power suggests multifaceted, diffuse and relational power. Contrary to such broad view of power, the conceptualisation of sphere of influence assumes an “influencing state” having *power over* the “influenced state”. This is seen as a static and immutable relationship of paternalism over the governed and controlled (Keal 1983). *House of Cards* adheres to such an idea of *power over* the influenced states, a system of control and authority. At the same time, the choreography of Claire Underwood demonstrates how other forms of power exist, but they would need to be accompanied by a feminist agenda in order to challenge the role of women under the structures of power.

The article first discusses how spheres of influence are gendered and militarised

in *House of Cards* through the framework of anthropomorphism. I propose that the *bodily state* with a sphere of influence is built upon a militarised masculinity, geared towards the prioritisation of toughness and violence. In the following section, I show how television and film are relevant forces in world politics. In order to problematise rather than naturalise spheres of influence, I then turn to bodies and choreography, in an attempt to deconstruct the androcentric framework of geopolitics. I do so by contesting an unambiguous idea of power associated with the masculine. After a plot summary of season 3, I examine how the main characters' embodied trajectories shed light on the gendering of power, and thus of power in/of spheres of influence.

## Gender, Militarism and Spheres of Influence

A "sphere of influence" can be best described, then, as geographic region characterised by the high penetration of one superpower to the exclusion of other powers and particularly of the rival superpower. (Kaufman 1976, 11)

A sphere of influence is a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it. (Keal 1983, 15)

Like Laura Shepherd writes, power is entangled in the concepts used to describe it (Shepherd 2013, 2-4). When we adhere to the ontopolitical claim of the existence of a Westphalian system of states, we adhere to the structures such a system maintains like militarisation and borders limiting movement of people and things. The fundamentals, or the ontopolitics, of sphere of influence is a battle between order and anarchy, and at its centre is the sovereign state to be expanded, protected and secured (Hast 2014). The idea of "sphere of influence" is state-centric, beginning from the pre-state-system suzerain,<sup>1</sup> continuing with colonial agreements, and transforming into tacit agreements. But it was the Cold War during which the concept was cemented, and when it began to signify the core arrangements of power in an antagonistic world. The enemy's sphere of influence was a tool of anarchy and expansion, one's own sphere of influence was a mechanism of order and protection.

In geopolitical literature, spheres of influence are connected to geostrategy and imperialist geopolitics, an association of geography, military elements and politics (Hast 2014, 80). Sphere of influence needs to be won over by force, because in a multipolar world there is always another great state to contest the expansion, thus often, (non-)intervention is the measure of and means to assert a sphere of influence. Post-Cold War debates on spheres of influence have taken the term as a tool for shaming Russian foreign policy, not naming, for example, the influence of the European Union as a sphere-of-influence policy (Hast 2014).

Historically, sphere of influence has had more meanings, some explicitly aiming

to solve the most compelling problem of the system of states: inter- state war. When sphere of influence is currently associated with intervention, submission, injustice, blackmail, warmongering, propaganda, building walls, creating disorder and conflict, E.H Carr, Carl Schmitt, Friedrich Naumann and Walter Lippmann all proposed, writing in the midst of the two world wars, that larger than state units could help to prevent the emergence of one single great power, and prevent wars in a system of many small states (Carr 2001 [1939]; Lippmann 1940; Naumann 1917; Schmitt 2003 [1950]). For them, spheres of influence meant order and stability, not disorder and violence. Naumann and Lippmann even believed that the influenced states could benefit from the arrangement. Carr and Schmitt saw that there could be less conflicts with less states, but enough great states to maintain a pluralist order (Hast 2014, Chapter 4).

Yet, these visions of spheres of influence are problematic for they fail to address the injustice inherent in world politics, from the everyday to the international. When sphere of influence is understood through the order- anarchy dichotomy, even if it attempts to challenge state-centrism by proposing a larger unit than the sovereign state as the agent in world politics, it fails to deconstruct relations of power. During the Cold War, in particular, spheres of influence were justified as protection (Hast 2014). Safeguarding small states from communist or capitalist penetration, sphere of influence assigned power to the masculine saviour and weakness to the feminine victim. Size mattered, nuclear missiles mattered, borders and boundaries mattered and materialised in spheres of influence. A sphere of influence helped to delineate identities, maintain hierarchies and deny sovereignty from the periphery while pretending to sustain it.

Sphere of influence disturbs notions of justice and equality, because it assigns a managerial role to states deemed great. Spheres of influence reaffirm state-centric identities and borders, but these are never stabilised. Conflict over borders looms constantly, because to emphasise the border is to invite war. The paradox is nothing really changes in the international system. War does not disappear and sphere of influence persists as militarised and interventionist. The way to deconstruct power related to spheres of influence would then be to unpack hierarchies, but this cannot be done comprehensively without taking gender into account. It is not enough to examine how the great power tries to and succeeds in influencing smaller states, how spheres of influence collide or how they are contested. The question needs to be posed, how is the state gendered, and how sphere of influence attests to the norms of masculinity and femininity, constructing a gender hierarchy to sustain it.

The reproduction of gender hierarchy, according to Spike Peterson, can be traced to the early states and the coercive power of the state, in which women's reproductive functions were emphasised in the kin communities (Peterson 1992, 33). I argue, spheres of influence rely on gendering through the privileging of state sovereignty – fixing a demarcation between the inside and outside of political community, and

defending this demarcation with armies and weapons. A state which wages wars abroad, or asserts a sphere of influence, expects obedience at home. The justification is protection, and those protected are put in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience. Like Iris Marion Young writes, “We are to accept a more authoritarian and paternalistic state power, which gets its support partly from the unity a threat produces and our gratitude for protection” (Young 2003, 2). Yet state security does not often ease or can even contribute to gendered insecurities. Peterson argues that “national security” is particularly contradictory to women (Peterson 1992, 32).

To further explore how sphere of influence relates to gendering, it is important to analyse how the ruler, the *bodily state*, is constructed and cemented as the norm. Cynthia Weber writes, the ideal type of sovereign man must be “a singular, *either* normal *or* perverse figure who authorizes or opposes a specific binary arrangement of order versus anarchy” (Weber 2016, 5). The queerly plural figure is either normal or perverse while simultaneously normal and perverse – making a queer logics of statecraft. The sovereign nation-state then inscribes a sovereign man as an always already existing domestic presence as the foundation of its authority, through which the man introduces foreign policies in order to tame international anarchy (Weber 2016, 5).

Sphere of influence is an extension of the coercive power of the state. Like colonisation, sphere of influence means a relation of structural domination and suppression of heterogeneity of the subjects in question.<sup>2</sup> Sphere of influence, by exacerbating centralisation of power and patriarchal conduct, by building security on the basis of enmities and hierarchies and by masculinising order while feminising anarchy, can contribute to subordination of vulnerable groups and nonnormative subjectivities, in particular.

A sphere of influence makes stability out of a permanent state of instability. It plays with the fear of a world war, and the promise of preventing major conflict with the pretext of controlling regions of potential or actual instability. Sphere of influence is built on a premise of order and an exclusion of anarchy, through gendering order provided by the great powers – lead by great men – as masculine and anarchy as feminine.

There are multiple masculinities, and femininities, and even those cannot be contained (Connell 2005). Yet, certain forms of masculinities and femininities are idealised or normalised. Militarised masculinity means that a soldier is masculine, and the masculine is a warrior (Eichler 2014). The traits attached to masculinity can then be achieved and proven in military service, and especially combat. Militarism is an *embodiment* of an ideology, an embodiment of a capacity and willingness to prepare for war – ultimately to kill.<sup>3</sup> Militarism feeds on masculinist values to sustain it (Enloe 2014, 226). Not all masculinities regard aspects associated with femininity as a threat, but one geared towards dominance, valorisation of violence

and the fear of seeming weak or soft (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016).

Paying attention to how dominance, control, violence and warrior identity are attached to masculine subjectivity, while weakness, vulnerability and softness are attached to feminine subjectivity, we can observe not only a gender binary, but a dichotomy of the influencing state and the influenced state. The choreographies in *House of Cards* show how spheres of influence are the result of the supremacy of militarised masculinity.

## The Geopolitics of Television Series

The power of media like film and television series lies in naturalising geopolitical narratives (Dodds 2015). Popular culture contributes to ideas, resistances, ideologies and affects moving across borders (Caso and Hamilton 2015). Yet, it is not only that popular culture constructs representations of world politics but popular culture makes, and even *is*, world politics.

Klaus Dodds suggests that in addition to the political economy of movie business (how governments and presidents influence and fund public entertainment industries), geopolitics and popular culture are co-constitutive (Dodds 2015, 53). Laura Shepherd makes the same case by arguing that the series *The West Wing* and the reality of the West Wing are mutually constitutive (Shepherd 2013, 57). As another example of visual politics, Juha Vuori, analysing the transformation of social imagery of torture through *Star Trek*, argues that post 9/11 torture in American cinema is committed no longer only by villains, but heroes as well (Vuori 2017). In fact, in democratic societies there is typically a level of necessary political engagement with popular culture, and thus rulers deploy references to it (Carver 2010). Just think about President Obama dropping the mic in his last White House Correspondents Dinner, an act popularised by rappers and comedians (Heritage 2016).

Robert A. Saunders argues that “small screen IR” is gaining relevance over the study of film, and explains that television series function both as a reflection of IR and as an imaginative and predictive force in world politics (Saunders 2017). The imaginative power, as I see it, comes from the aesthetics of the screen, when politics emerges in the gap between representation and the represented (Bleiker 2009). Moving image offers a sensual experience of world politics – the film-body enables unusual and changing perspectives – close-ups, views from far away, above or underneath. Thus, an aesthetic analysis, which relies on the senses, results in “opening up thinking space” (Bleiker 2017, 262). The influence of moving image takes place also through empathy, or what Anthony D’Aloia refers to as cinematic empathy (D’Aloia 2012). The bodies moving on screen excite the spectator’s body, accompanying the vitality and tension of the quasi-body. The camera – its

perspective, cuts and moves become the body to follow, creating a cinematic embodiment.

It is not just that popular culture in general is a powerful tool in shaping geopolitical imageries, television series is becoming increasingly relevant medium as part of the everyday (Coletti 2017). A new life has emerged for television series through streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and HBO, and the providers now compete through in-house produced originals, like *House of Cards*. Moreover, there is fusion between film and television in terms of stars, production and financing (Glynn 2012). For instance, the Coen brothers film *Fargo* from 1996 is the basis of a series with the same name by FX. As a good example of Hollywood going to television, the Coen brothers are making their first television series called *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*.

Dominique Moïsi writes that popular series like *Game of Thrones*, *Homeland* and *House of Cards* are sources of political imagination, a means to pass on political messages to the public (Moïsi 2016). According to Mark Chou, *House of Cards* popularises how democrats work against democracy by mapping out the amassing of power in the hands of the few (Chou 2014). *House of Cards* is indeed a popular sign of undemocratic politics (see, for example, Keller 2015). The series was referred to, for example, recently during a government crisis in Finland by the leader of the Swedish People's Party of Finland, Anna-Maja Henriksson, calling the Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's political games a Finnish version of *House of Cards* (Koivisto 2017). Reference to *House of Cards* – in fact not a television series even, but a production of an on-demand internet streaming media provider – in a plenary session of the parliament and in a press conference, relies on the assumption that the show is widely known by the politicians and the public.

In fact, all the three series mentioned by Moïsi are relevant for spheres of influence. *Game of Thrones* and *Homeland*, like *House of Cards*, display core-periphery relations, and a territorially discernible self-other relationship. Popular series are typically compared to historical contexts and events, and in particular, political series such as *House of Cards* are discussed through their accuracy in terms of "reality". The expectation of authenticity comes partly from references to historical events and people, and from comparisons between the fictive figures and their real-life counterparts. For example, Pussy Riot members Nadya Tolonnikova and Masha Alyokhina played themselves in one episode, and Frank Underwood has been compared to President Donald Trump (see, for example, Jeffries 2017). Season 3 was also criticised for being too unrealistic: President Petrov did not look enough like Putin, and the great power game in the Middle East was seen to overshadow the more acute conflict in Ukraine (Standish 2015; Taylor 2015).

It is difficult to say how popular exactly *House of Cards* is – in the United States or elsewhere. Netflix, in which the subscriber pays for a commercial-free environment, does not release viewer data, so exact viewer statistic is not available.

Yet, the importance of the series is not only about viewer numbers. *House of Cards* was the first original series to receive attention as an engine of subscriber growth for Netflix and continues to receive media attention due to its relation to real-life political drama. *House of Cards* also attracted traditional film audiences because of its high profile production staff and cast (Klarer 2014). Moreover, the series challenged the traditional broadcast schedule by releasing the entire season at once. Thus, considering the popularity and media interest of *House of Cards*, and how the series converses with actual and historical events and people, it can help legitimise a narrative of spheres of influence, and the gendered hierarchies related to them.

The series revolves around a ruthless and manipulative Democrat politician Francis (Frank) Underwood, played by Kevin Spacey. The thrill of the series is to follow how far Underwood is willing to go to advance his political career. A selfish opportunist as the central player within a democratic institution affirms existing anxiety over politics – if the viewer distrusts politicians already, Underwood confirms that preconception.

The series follows how Frank climbs up from the position of House Majority Whip to the President of the United States. Beside him, behind him, ahead of him is Claire Underwood, played by Robin Wright, who aspires her own career while supporting Frank's ambitions. The American version is an adaptation of the BBC series (1990), and it is based on the novel by Michael Dobbs (1989).<sup>4</sup> The first season premiered in 2013 on Netflix, the fifth aired in 2017.<sup>5</sup> My interest is in season 3, which portrays spheres of influences as a foreign and domestic policy tool of the US and Russia. This brings Russia's President Viktor Petrov into the picture, played by the Danish actor Lars Mikkelsen, who tries to forestall the plans of the Underwoods.

The series represents geopolitics in a traditional way as an arena of great power rivalry. As Gilbert argues, in popular series like *House of Cards*, parodic portrayals do not challenge preconceived notions of contemporary political culture, but rather reinforce what we already know (Gilbert 2014). Similarly, *House of Cards* confirms what we already know about the primacy of militarised masculinity. In the series, all foreign is *other* and weakness is alien to the self of the powerful. The national, hierarchical and masculine are celebrated qualities constructing not only a state-centric but United States-centric perspective typical to other political TV series like *The Good Wife* (Coletti 2017, 14).

### The Choreography of *House of Cards*

Season 3 of *House of Cards* ends in Claire Underwood's words: "I am leaving you". It appears, she reclaims her power, she reclaims the stage. It looks like *she makes the space*. Space is meaningless unless something moves in it. Bodies make the space; they make the political as they move. Limbs take space, extend and withdraw. The volume, pitch and speed of speech signal powerfulness, as do body poses, gestures

and walking styles (Cuddy 2015).

The bodies in *House of Cards* are categorised by their movement, but constantly together with the office they hold or the societal status they have been given to perform. The central characters have a never ending public presence, not only when Frank addresses the show's viewer, but because they are ready at all times to answer to the call. Bodyguards, assistants, journalists, politicians; they are all working, all the time. Thus, the bodies are framed as professional bodies, or bodies on the way of someone's career. Some have loftier goals, like journalists, but they are possessed too to pursue their mission to exhaustion. Thus, the body is underlined as a presidential body, an ambassador body, a judge body, a businessman body, prostitute body and so forth. And all these bodies perform gender, yet not stereotypically.

The main characters are also national bodies, which perform the state, its narratives and identity. In particular, season 3, where global politics and US- Russia relations are on Frank Underwood's agenda, feeds on the metaphor of states as persons, as human-like beings, an organism with body and person- hood. The idea of "states as people", as developed by Alexander Wendt in 1999, makes the self of the state relevant in world politics. For Wendt, state agency is not reducible to individuals and their actions – the state has intentionality and agency due to the structures of relationships among its elements. Most importantly, state as person, with human properties (like emotions and interests), pervades social sciences and everyday life (Wendt 2004; see also Luoma-Aho 2012, 55).

Even if for Wendt states as persons are real (Wendt 2004), in terms of popular geopolitics, I find it more fruitful to engage with the idea of the state projected on the human body. This means, rather than imagining state as person, the state is written/choreographed on a body or the body writes/ choreographs the state. This imagination has consequences. In order to constitute the state and legitimise domination under its name, the figure of an enemy is written on a foreign, refugee or stranger body, which is seen to pollute the social body of the state (Neocleous 2003). Imagining the state in the body of a person helps not only to separate the inside from the outside but to define the characteristics of the state.

Jonathan D. Wadley writes, contrary to the anthropomorphic images of ungendered states, performances within the field of security cannot be but gendered (Wadley 2009). Subjects in international security are created per- formatively through states' behaviour as masculinised protectors. In a similar vein, Annica Kronsell describes EU security policy as founded upon protector masculinity (Kronsell 2016). States as gendered subjects are performed similar to human subjects (Wadley 2009). Considering that spheres of influence are justified as a means to secure the system of states (against unipolarity or universalism) and/or to protect the rights of small states, the relationship between the influencing and the influenced state manifests in a performance of protector masculinity. In this view, great powers should protect and manage smaller nations, because world peace rests on their

shoulders (Wight 1977; Bull 2002 [1977]; Jackson 2000).

Wadley criticises theories of states as persons when they assume existence prior to social interaction – that is, ignoring how the state is constructed as a subject (Wadley 2009, 44). Sphere of influence as a relation between state- subjects, as a spatially bounded identity, as a hierarchy, is a type of social interaction, which *makes the state as a subject*. It is not that only great powers can have spheres of influence, but having a sphere of influence makes a great power. Then, there is no state a priori to the social interaction of influence, but state is crafted and imagined from the web of hierarchical relationships. Sphere of influence as a promise of protection, and as control and domination, can then be seen as performance of influence which writes the great power as a masculine subject.

In a political television drama like *House of Cards*, the viewer sees state through the human body, as the human body. By being and moving in space, the political bodies of the characters of *House of Cards* are the anthropomorphisations of the United States and Russia. Yet, *House of Cards* produces not only state as person but the great power as manly. By acting “like a man”, Claire Underwood performs what constitutes a man, and this means constituting the idea of a man/state before he acted (Wadley 2009, 47). The series reproduces the idea(l) of the system of sovereign states as a battlefield of the great powers, yet it does not do this only by contextualising the series in the world political arena but in conjunction with human bodily choreography, without which there would be no drama. Central to this drama is a choreography which helps to focus visually on how power is embodied, shifting attention away from the abstractions of political and military theory to corporeal agency (Morris and Giersdorf 2016). Political agency appears through the body’s movement, through the choreography of power and resistance (Puumala et al. 2011; Väyrynen 2013). The notion of choreography then establishes a relationship between movement and (political) ordering. When bodies move in time and space, they arrange relationships, connections and emotions.

Choreography, for dance professor Susan Foster, is a plan or score according to which movement unfolds (Foster 2010). The way body moves excites other bodies to move and to feel, but choreography is not only a relationship between bodies but also between bodies and space. Foster writes, “Buildings choreograph space and people’s movement through them; cameras choreograph cinematic action, birds perform intricate geographies; and combat is choreographed” (Foster 2010, 2). Moreover there are always cultural, political and economic values embedded in a choreography.<sup>6</sup> Bodily gestures, positions in space and ways of moving in *House of Cards* become a choreography of the *bodily state* when the performing bodies are profoundly entangled with their stately role.

The choreography of *House of Cards* produces agency in-between bodies, bodies moving in relation to each other and the socio-political context they are implicated in. There is no one definition of agency but I understand it here as the capacity to

move, act and initiate change in oneself or in the environment in a given situation, acknowledging that agency can also disempower, leaving the person in a worse situation than before (Sylvester 2015). This agency is corporeal, expressed in a choreography which entails dialogues and lines, but importantly, the bodily gestures and poses displaying *power over/to/with*. I argue, by normalising *power over* as a masculinised performance, the choreographies in *House of Cards* normalise spheres of influence.

## Plot Synopsis

The main storyline of season 3 relevant for the following analysis is this: Francis Underwood has become the sitting President of the United States, after plotting against president Walker, who is forced to step down. The great power game in season 3 takes place in the Middle East. Frank Underwood wants a bilateral approach with Russia to end the Israel–Palestine conflict and to score the needed foreign policy points for his presidential campaign. As typical for spheres of influence, the great powers ignore the interests of the population affected. In *House of Cards*, civilians are sacrificed without hesitation for foreign policy gains, which serve Underwood’s electoral campaign and nothing else. The people of Israel and Palestine are not once mentioned, they are invisible. Palestine and Israel are unimportant, represented merely as territories upon which the powerful act for their own – domestic and personal – gains, while the great states are constructed as the protectors of and in the society of states.

Claire Underwood, the First Lady, seeks appointment as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, but after the Congress denies the confirmation, President Underwood appoints her anyway. Claire’s professional mission becomes negotiating a peace plan for the Jordan Valley with Russian, Israeli and Palestinian ambassadors. Claire and Frank travel to Russia to negotiate the release of a political prisoner, LGTB activist Michael Corrigan. Petrov demands that Corrigan apologise on Russian television, leading the activist to kill himself while Claire has fallen asleep inside the prison cell. Claire, upset by Corrigan’s suicide, acts against the two presidents’ advice by giving a statement in a press conference condemning Russia’s President Viktor Petrov. President Petrov is portrayed as the arch enemy of Frank and Claire, and Russia of the United States. Petrov does all he can to sabotage both the foreign policy of the United States and the relationship between Frank and Claire. To accept Frank Underwood’s proposal for peace in the Jordan Valley, Claire is forced to step down as the ambassador. Towards the end of the season, the Underwoods’ tensions amount, and Claire announces she will leave Frank.

I now proceed to looking into the bodily choreographies of Frank, Viktor and Claire in order to carve out the gendering of their respective states, and the resulting gendering of spheres of influence.

## Making the Bodily United States

Frank Underwood: I understand the Old Testament God whose power is absolute, who rules through fear, but him ... [looking at the statue of Jesus in a church].

Bishop: There is no such thing as absolute power for us, except on the receiving end. Using fear will get you nowhere. It is not your job to determine what is just. It is not your place to determine the version of God you like the best [...] You serve the Lord. And through him, you serve others. (Season 3, episode 4)

President Underwood has the above dialogue with a bishop in the middle of the night. It is two men in a dark church. They look at each other, standing at the church corridor, Underwood gazing at the altar when he asks the bishop what justice means. When the bishop says the president needs to serve the Lord, and the people, they have walked to the altar. It looks as if Underwood's ego gives way to something bigger than him, but when the bishop leaves, Frank positions his body above others, even the divine. He walks to the statue of Jesus and with a stern look preaches to it, trying to stand tall, to match the height of the statue, and finally spits on face of the statue. But the sculpture of Christ gets back at him, falling, and breaking on the ground. Such bodily gesture shows the omnipotence and arrogance of Frank Underwood, something words could not do. He marks a holy object with his saliva.

To further explore Frank's gesture, I turn to Richard K. Ashley, who refers to statecraft as mancraft. When in medieval times statecraft meant "fixing an interpretation of God the king could mirror and serve", modern statecraft fixes "a paradigmatic interpretation of sovereign man that the state can mirror and serve" (Ashley 1989, 303). Underwood's image of God to mirror is absolute power. Those aspiring to become the unruly rulers, those who can defy international law and embrace it simultaneously, are great powers like the United States and Russia, states which do choose the version of God they want and determine justice for others because they can. They are "the Great Responsibilities" (Wight 1995, 43-44). The Great Responsibilities entertain the fallacy of being responsible for world peace and regional stability, which justifies the means. Here is the reason why spheres of influence pose such a moral dilemma: with any attempt to maintain order and prevent violence through territorial influence comes the abuse of position, the national interest, the rivalry. We see this abuse in the bodily choreography of President Underwood.

But there is another side to Frank, a private one, something unexplained and unnamed. It is his uncanny relationships to different men and women around him, including Claire: an openness and violence embodied simultaneously. Across the series, Frank and Claire perform also a queer identity. In season 2, Frank and Claire kiss together with Frank's bodyguard Meechum, whom Frank seems to have feelings for, and season 3 shows an intimate moment between Frank and the writer Tom

Yates who later becomes Claire's lover with Frank's blessing. In season 5, Frank is again shown kissing a man, hiding in a basement of the White House. But the sovereign man the state can mirror is not the queer side of Frank Underwood, because that part of him remains disconnected from the *bodily state* – that is, Underwood as state. The queer, nonnormative (Weber 2016) side of President Underwood remains private while his public figure represents a masculinised and hetero- normative sovereign. When in the public weakness is alien, in the private, alien is not weakness. A queer logic of statecraft does not actualise in *House of Cards*, because Frank needs to be the sovereign man who tames the anarchy of the perverse: the instability in Claire Underwood and in President Petrov. But for Frank, sex is about power (as he states in season 1), and his queerly figure is, in fact, reduced, like everything else to *power over*.

Thus, the sovereign man rules, and the sovereign man is ruthless and power-driven, rational and emotionally distanced. This results in a singular view of political power in which statecraft is mancraft with no openness to towards foreign or eerie, and no interest in citizens, and especially to vulnerable groups. A queering of international politics (making it inclusive of nonnormative and non-binary subjectivities) would be the end of sovereignty (mancraft) as we know it, and thus of spheres of influence. Without a model of fatherly protection, how could spheres of influence be legitimised? *House of Cards* does not reenact binaries in terms of sexualities – refusing to categorise Frank as a bisexual – but it does so in terms of mancraft, of state sovereignty and the international system. Frank away from the public gaze can be whatever he wants, but the statesman and the system he helps to maintain is bounded by ideals of masculinity.

Spit is not the only bodily fluid Frank Underwood displays his power with. His choreographic tone is set in episode 1 where he urinates on the tombstone of his father's grave. This is where he also addresses the audience, turning to the camera: "I have to do these sort of things now. Makes me seem more human. And you have to be a little human when you're the president". But it is not the sort of things he has to do, but can do. It is not that urinating makes him seem more human, but powerful over others, more capable and even "great power like". Urinating on a place he should not – extending his crotch, power posing, smiling – Frank makes a bodily statement available to a person with male reproductive organs. Although at that moment he is alone, posing only to the viewer, he is still the President of the United States, travelling with a presidential motorcade to the graveyard.

Throughout the season Frank shows how to manipulate, how to wage war, how to succeed with violence. Central to Frank's masculinity is his readiness to resort to military options. This image fits with the way US presidency is militarised outside the series too. As Cynthia Enloe writes,

Imagining that 'commander in chief' is the *essence* of the U.S. presidency is a profoundly

gendered distortion that shrinks the meaning of governance and gives any presidential officeholder and “his” strategists a constant incentive to feature military solutions above more subtle, prolonged, complex sorts of solutions (italics in the original). (Enloe 2004, 154)

Military options become normalised together with protector masculinity.

Indeed, Underwood considers Americans as ignorant children, sheep to be herded. He instrumentalises war for his presidential campaign, and ignores the human suffering that his actions cause. In episode 1 of season 3, this is demonstrated through an incident in which President Underwood needs to decide whether to hit a target which would eliminate an important terrorist leader but would lead to civilian casualties, children included. Underwood is cold-headed and gives the order to strike even if the Secretary General is against it. Underwood brings the First Lady, Claire Underwood, into the room, in order to show her the real decisions he has to make, the power he has over the lives and deaths of people. Frank wants to shock his wife because she has expressed a wish to seek the nomination as the ambassador to the UN.

Claire stands at the back of the room observing. Making his decision, Frank leans against the table, he has the front row all to himself, and Claire is visible as a blurred figure on the background. As the missile strikes, the camera focuses on Frank’s face and Claire remains a spectator. When her eyes are shown they seem moist, but she tries to keep up a brave face, even when knowing that children might have been killed. Returning from the war room, Claire leads the way and stops to say, without looking at Frank, “I still want it”. Frank replies “All right”, as if she passed a test, and takes her into his arm while they walk side by side, then hand in hand. From the first episode, Claire Underwood’s undertaking is to adapt to politics as militarism, and the viewer is served the assertion of spheres of influence through military operations. In both cases, military violence is sterilised and distant, invisible to the spectator. It is not only that states and persons merge in *House of Cards*, but politics is an embodied, lived experience. War on terror is embodied in the President of the United States when he authorises the drone attack and when he has to meet a victim of the drone strike. In episode 4, Underwood meets with a man injured by the drone strike in order to apologise to him. His apology is a charade, yet Frank experiences a moment of softness in a person-to-person interaction with the drone strike victim, Mahmoud, in the Oval Office. Mahmoud is angry, and tells Underwood how he dreamt of choking him to death with his bare hands. Mahmoud does not forgive, and Underwood pleads to the duty to his country. Mahmoud replies, “There’s a fine line between duty and murder. Only you had the power to prevent what happened to me.” Mahmoud suddenly has a seizure of phantom pain in his amputated limb and Frank gets genuinely upset. He is *touched by war* (Sylvester 2013). Geopolitics is painted on their bodies: the amputation, the pain, the shock of witnessing the man’s seizure. Victim and perpetrator meet, and statistics, probabilities, calculations and

military strategies are set aside for a moment.

At the end of episode 4, Frank discusses over the phone with Claire how he had been weak and showed mercy to a judge of the Supreme Court, whom he was supposed to manipulate, after the encounter with the drone victim. He says to Claire, “It was because of Mahmoud. I let him get to me.” Frank is at home, sitting in a position, which makes his body smaller: shoulders dropped down, back bent, staring at his feet. Lamenting over his emotionality, he regrets not being ruthless and clear-minded enough. Emotionality, for the masculinity, which Frank performs, is a feminine quality: opposite of rational strategic thinking. As Swati Parashar writes, emotionality, constructed as gendered and feminised, is seen as a sign of weakness (Parashar 2011). Great leaders and great powers are not weak and apologetic. Yet, that “lapse” makes Frank more human, less cruel. It is the necessary choreography to pin femininity against masculinity, if we compare it to the scene where he urinates, and performs his bodily power. The viewer sees an exception – something not to be repeated, but presented as to conform compassion as flaw in the *bodily state*.

## Order and Anarchy

Claire Underwood: I’m not soliciting, I’m demanding.

Israeli Ambassador Caspi: I feel sorry for you, Claire. Your husband sends you to talk tough. But as soon as things go wrong in the Jordan Valley, he’ll turn his back and leave Israel to clean up the mess. He doesn’t have the muscle. He can’t even get the congress to work with him. Or back you up after you call out Petrov. He turned his back on you, just like he will on us.

Claire: My husband is the bravest and most resolute man I know. He will succeed in this plan.

Caspi: Brave? I served in Jordan Valley. As did the President and the Foreign Minister. Has he?

Claire: You held a gun and somebody told you where to stand. Don’t confuse that with the burden the Commander in Chief faces.  
(Season 3, episode 7)

When Claire leaves the party, to which she arrived in order to tell the Israeli ambassador Caspi that the US expects obedience from their ally, she marches out as confident as she came in, a stern look on her face. Claire’s performance reminds of a common description of Margaret Thatcher, “Margaret was the toughest man in the room” (Enloe 2014, 31). She is menacing, unwavering in her speech and bodily presence. Caspi tries to insult Claire by saying that Israel is not the only puppet of Frank Underwood, Claire is as well, but Claire keeps calm and indifferent to the offence. This is a different Claire from the one who appeared sentimental when the

drone hit the target. This Claire, interacting with Caspi, no longer negotiates politely. They talk militaristic.

But that is not the way she first met with Caspi. Their first encounter took place when Claire Underwood became the UN Ambassador (rejected by the Senate but named by the President), a position, which Claire wanted badly in order to make her own mark in world politics. In episode 3 Ambassador Underwood meets together with the Secretary General the ambassadors of Israel and Palestine to discuss the deal between the United States and Russia on a joint peacekeeping force in the region. In the meeting, seated at a couch, Claire looks down at her hands. Her body is tight and constrained, arms and legs closed, making her appear smaller. She does not get a word in because the Secretary General does not see her as qualified to be the ambassador. The scene presents not only Claire's difficult position as the First Lady and Ambassador appointed by her husband, but the UN itself merely as an instrument of great power management, rather than an agent in its own right. Decisions are ultimately made by the great powers, and the UN is used as a tool for sphere-of-influence games in *House of Cards*.

In order to show the process of becoming a *bodily state* – a manly state – Claire first needed to represent a feminised instability and emotionality. Claire spills over; she lets people get to her.<sup>7</sup> In a press conference in Moscow she defends an activist named Michael Corrigan, imprisoned in Russia on the pretext of the anti-gay laws. She shames both presidents by admonishing Viktor Petrov in front of the press. Claire's unpremeditated "outburst" is the action against which the masculine leadership can be portrayed: the over-emotional feminised subject. Like Parashar observes, angry women disrupt the image of the submissive/domicile woman (Parashar 2015). When Claire gets angry she gets dangerous for the men around her. Claire is not the sovereign man even if she tries to act like the sovereign man. Not so much because she does not have "a seat at the table", but because parts of her queerness are visible in the public. She does not lament her emotionality, she is not indifferent to suffering, and she allows others to see her. Claire exposes her vulnerability already in season 2 when she tells in a TV interview about a rape she was victim of 30 years earlier.

As Sjoberg and Tickner write, the relative lack of women in high political office is the result of disguised form of exclusion: masculinity exacerbating traits such as strength, independence, rationality, protection is the standard to which office-holders must aspire, regardless of their biological sex (Tickner and Sjoberg 2011, 1). Gender is relational. The ideal or hegemonic masculinity needs the otherness of femininity and other forms of masculinity for its construction, and this makes the power hierarchy, in which masculinity excludes characteristics considered feminine (Tickner and Sjoberg 2011, 4; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848; Wadley 2009, 49). Claire balances between the masculine expectations of an office-holder and the inclusion of feminine traits. She becomes more aggressive and assertive as the season

proceeds. Her body becomes more *stately* and she becomes more a *bodily state* by performing manliness.

In episode 5, Claire has invited the Russian ambassador, Alexi Moryakov, who reluctantly enters to a women's public bathroom. She has chosen the location carefully and planned her choreography in it. Claire asks, while putting on her mascara, "Eyes?" "Perfect", Alexi replies. Claire responds, "Always nice to have a man's opinion". Earlier Alexi had criticised her competency as an ambassador while complementing on her dress. Claire makes a more intimate bodily statement of shamelessness by entering the toilet booth and urinating with the door open. She tells Alexi, shouting from the toilet seat, how the president has signed an executive order to reassign 5000 troops to a permanent standby for UN peacekeeping operations:

So the moment you sell arms to Iran, we will shoot the planes out of the sky, the trucks off the road and the ships out of the water. Now maybe you'd be able to afford sanctions [Claire pulls her skirt up and flushes the toilet while Alexi looks the other way] but you sure as hell can't afford a war.

It is not so much about what Claire says, but how she says it from the toilet seat, and how her body's movement makes the space. To resist marginalisation, Claire adopts a particular masculinised style of action, that is, urination as a symbol of her strength of character. Claire transforms a performance of the cautious and peaceful UN-body, to a performance of state-body as mancraft. The transfiguration takes place in her bodily choreography, the way she moves in space, in relation to others, and in the way she addresses others.

Claire's performance of masculinity is not emancipatory for women even if she performs power in order to resist. Feminist efforts to secure a valid place for women by situating them in the privileged position ("on top") within a hierarchy are still to maintain the hierarchy. Putting women in the place where men have been merely attributes to women men's traditional location. In so doing, a genuine thinking of feminine difference - of women's place- remains neglected (Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007, 13). For that reason, blogger Amanda Marcotte has applauded the series for "feminist offerings", while reminding that this does not mean female viewers would or should see Claire Underwood as a role model (Marcotte 2014a, 2014b).

The feminist offering, if there is one, is that the series addresses gendering. In fact, through Claire's choreography, we can observe how deeply gendered politics is. The male figure has the physical *power over* the female figure. When Claire complains that their political bargain as a couple is more favourable to Frank, and refuses to travel with him on election campaigning, she becomes a problem. She has developed a hunger for power, and Frank tries to contain that. Claire stands calm and composed, while Frank waves his arms in the air and shouts in anger, finally saying, "Without me, you are nothing". Gender is performed by the capable body which

takes Claire's face violently in the grip of the hand, not letting go when Claire shows signs of discomfort. "I have to run this country", Frank says to Claire. The way he runs the country is to tame and domesticate even the closest person to him. One of Claire's roles, then, is to visually demonstrate this persistency of gender. Claire is taken seriously only when she becomes physically and verbally threatening, and the same militarist attribute is attached to the logic of spheres of influence in which the driving force is *power over* the influenced states. "In such rivalries, women are marginalized unless (with- standing ridicule as "unfeminine") they can convincingly cloak themselves in a particular masculinized style of speech and action." (Enloe 2014, 31). In a patriarchal society, there is a privileging of masculinity and marginalisation the feminine. Claire urinating in front of her male colleague disturbs gendered expectations, but to the effect of further marginalisation of that, which is considered feminine. It does not dismantle a world that is built to accommodate only some bodies (Ahmed 2017).

*House of Cards* visualises spheres of influence as an order-anarchy binary: in the series, order is associated with the President of the United States regardless of his violence, while anarchy is attached to the body of the First Lady who does not embody statesmen-qualities. Frank is the centre of drama, the flesh through which everything significant passes and on which all that is important is written. He is great, the way great states are made great, by imposing their *power over* others, extending their influence way beyond their borders.

Yet the view is not so simple. Claire's movement is more than what a gendered binary of anarchy (the feminised) and order (the masculinised) suggests. She embodies a liminal subjectivity, and she performs power in multiplicity. There is resistance embodied in Claire, because her choreography of power is more than the able-bodied extensions, and carefully planned threats. In episode 7, Claire is watching a group of Buddhist monks do artwork at the presidential residence and the camera follows Claire lowering herself all the way to the level of the monks working by the table. She has "a seat at the table" not because she has any power *over* the monks, but because she chooses to stay *with* them, positioned like them, silent like them, concentrated like them, curious about them. Positioning herself in the space, she at least visually makes room for power with. Claire then enables imagining the state from a new perspective, without *power over*.

## Killing in the Name of the State

Viktor Petrov: I have killed a man with my bare hands. It wasn't make believe. Do you [President Underwood] think you're capable? I think you are. (Season 3, episode 10)

There is one more role to be introduced, in order to understand how *House of Cards* incites a geopolitical anxiety, which justifies extending militarist ideology to spheres of influence. Mancraft is militarised not only when Frank favours military solutions to international conflict, but in particular, when the President of the Russian Federation Viktor Petrov appears, not just as the old ideological arch enemy, but as a true soldier, in comparison to Frank's inexperience in the military. The human form of a state is then not only performed as capable and aggressive, but explicitly as a soldier body.

Viktor Petrov is cruel like Frank, painted with attributes of danger. He is a pragmatist, but also moody. He plays mind games, as he is, in Frank's words, "a guy who was brought up through the KGB". Petrov is not only choreographed moody and cunning as he moves, makes his moves, but he uses personal insults to get under the skin of his opponents. He keeps insulting, humiliating and even harassing Claire. At a party, Petrov forces a kiss on Claire in front of everyone. For Viktor, Claire becomes the territory upon which power can be projected. Moreover, Claire is the bargaining chip between the US and Russia when Viktor agrees to withdraw Russian forces out of the Jordan Valley demanding, among other things, that Claire steps down as the UN ambassador. Frank agrees and betrays Claire as result of a "grand bargain". As if to underline the anthropomorphism in *House of Cards*, Viktor wants a *personal* victory over the Underwoods by driving the two apart, and not only a *political* victory for Russia.

For Enloe, states depend on notions of femininity and women themselves. This makes states both fragile, dependent on women, and makes them spend resources on controlling them (Enloe 2004, 89). An international system of patriarchy is one which places honour on domination, and is a key explanatory component in conflict in the international society (Sjoberg 2009b). *House of Cards* is filled with examples of state fragility, dependency and control which ties together the two levels of hierarchies of human and state-level: the dependency of Frank on Claire, the honour placed on a military mission, and the feminising of the influenced state in need of protection and control.

In *House of Cards*, the ideal masculinity is militarised through threats, control and use of force. The primacy of the masculine – the gendered politics of nationalism (Enloe 2004, 101) – is visible in *House of Cards*, not least through the male characters whose credibility and respectability rely on a sexual politics objectifying women, even a hatred of women who are considered disposable. Underwood is violent against women, and so is Petrov. Their militarised masculinity is then also openly misogynist. Frank's and Viktor's behaviour is the kind of violence a powerful state would do to its subordinates in a patriarchal system of dependency and control. It is the resort to the principle of sovereignty which silences feminist, postcolonial and queer demands of equal rights. Likewise, sovereignty is used as an excuse to counter international influence when the powerful feel threatened.

Spheres of influence are aimed at countering the influence of the other, and the game is on between the US and Russia in the Jordan Valley. Petrov meets with Frank during his visit to the United States. When Frank asked for guidance from the bishop, it was two men in a church. Now it is two men in the Oval Office. Seated by the coffee table to discuss the Jordan Valley peace plan, Petrov is unwilling to cooperate because he sees no benefits from it to Russia. Both men sit with their legs spread wide, leaning forward, taking their space – typical postures for displaying confidence. Petrov demands that the US dismantle the missile defence system in Europe and does not believe American interests are about peace in the Jordan Valley. He says “You’re trying to consolidate your foothold in the region. The Black Sea, Kazakhstan, Chechnya, Crimea. So please ... don’t insult me with peace.” Underwood proposes that a scale down in Poland and the Czech Republic could be possible if it’s done secretly, but Petrov is still not satisfied. He says, “I woke up with a taste of those cigars [we smoked yesterday] in my mouth, thinking of Cuba and Kennedy. I won’t be humiliated the way Khrushchev was in Turkey”. Petrov is referring to the Cuban missile crisis, in which Khrushchev proposed to Kennedy, that the Soviet Union would remove its missiles from Cuba if the United States would remove its missiles from Turkey. Russia withdraws the missiles from Cuba, but the agreement to remove US missiles from Turkey was made under a secret protocol. Russia suffered a defeat in the struggle for spheres of influence, and soon Khrushchev was ousted to be replaced by Brezhnev. But Cuba was not lost for the Soviet Union only. In fact, Weber argues that Cuba was the feminised symbolic object of desire for the masculinised United States, and in the Cuban revolution in 1959, the trophy mistress of Cuba was “lost” (Weber 1999, 1–2). Sphere of influence is thus gendered when the hegemonic powers seek feminised trophies in order to uphold their positions. Petrov has the leverage, he does not need any deal with Underwood, so he does not only start storytelling (about cars and Cuban cigars), but does it calmly and slowly, taking pauses, leaning back, relaxed even when talking about the humiliation of Khrushchev. Petrov is embodying *power over*. When the men get serious, they lean front again, President Underwood taking a very long pause to decide that he is done with Petrov. When Frank and Viktor have an omnipotent role in making foreign policy decisions of colossal importance, they embody the state. Their choreography is one with the state.

As the season progresses, so does militarisation. In Claire Underwood, the viewer sees the advance of militarisation, not only through the prioritisation of violent solutions to insecurity or the normalisation of military values but in her bodily movements as a person with power. In other words, she gradually begins to embody militarism, and militarism is written on her body. Again the feminised diplomacy is pinned against masculinised struggles for power. Claire’s diplomatic solution is deemed naïve, soft and ineffective, while Frank’s “high risk–high gain” approach signifies bravery and problem-solving skills. When things get heated with Russia,

President Underwood's decision to travel on a secret mission to the conflict zone to meet with Petrov in a bunker against advice – wearing camouflage – is admirable, because he succeeds in preventing an open conflict with Russia and Israel as a result. The jeeps drive in a deserted landscape and arrive to a base with armed men all around. Now it is two men in a bunker.

In the bunker, in order to irritate Frank, Viktor boasts with having been in Afghanistan and having killed a man with his bare hands. He is the combat soldier, able and willing to kill. Frank, instead, is not a soldier; he did not serve his country on a military mission. Yet, Frank has ordered killing, killed a congressman staging it as suicide, and pushed a female reporter under a train. Both their capacities in problem solving rely on the use of force.<sup>8</sup> The way to prove a masculine identity in the bunker scene comes down to combat experience and capacity to kill, and in the light of such representation of statecraft, asserting a sphere of influence is an extension to the performance of the soldier or warrior identity.

The soldier performs a duty to the state, vital to the state's existence. State militarism and *power over* takes sphere-of-influence policy to a conflictual direction: the interventionist practice, in which forceful domination and control overtake any peaceful means of exerting influence. Spheres of influence are profoundly militaristic, and intertwined with the performance of mancraft. As Enloe writes, it is exactly this militarised and masculinised culture in the United States which pressures civilian candidates into appearing “tough” on military issues while a masculinised competition limits the capacity to contribute in building a genuinely secure international community (Enloe 2004, 125–128). A militarised foreign policy silences feminised voices. This contributes to a sphere-of-influence policy in which women and men, who do not perform the masculine ideal, have no say, and the women and men who have a say need to live up to certain gendered expectations. Not only is the influenced state feminised and subjugated as an abstraction (the imagined state or the faceless mass), but feminised subjectivities are too, in both the influenced and influencing states.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed spheres of influence in political television drama through the imagination of state as a person, and the person as a state, focussing on the performance of gender. Popular culture is an important source for political imagination, for it visualises world politics for a broad audience. In the case of *House of Cards*, the expectation of realism makes it a powerful series in conveying gendered geopolitical meanings.

In this article, I have conceptualised power as manifold, and shown how the masculinised ideal of power (i.e. *power over*) manifests in bodily performance. The

physical bodies of the main protagonists in *House of Cards* are anthropomorphisations of the national body: both Claire and Frank are aestheticised as able-bodied: sporty, strong and rarely sleep deprived. Yet, Claire's body is depicted not just able but frail, not only when she kneels down to the level of the monks at work, but when she keeps her head just above the water in her bathtub, as if about to drown herself; when Frank grabs her face violently, and when she is forcefully kissed by the Russian president. Claire's performance enables the fluidity and convergence of order and anarchy, military and non-military, border and boundlessness. Her agency is "out of joint" when she struggles to find her place in the masculinised environment.

Yet, the trouble is Claire does not want to alter structures of power, but she reinstalls them. Claire's performance shows how power cannot be purified, while acknowledging power as relational. She moves between *power over/power to resist/power with*. Claire Underwood tries to resist, but she too is enthralled by sovereignty. Thinking through power this way is also to ask, how can we know what *power with* would look like. This is important for spheres of influence, in which an unequal relation exists by definition: is there power to resist and can there be any power with? Claire shows that agency is not only aggression and control, when she defends the American gay activist. At the same time, the rise of Claire through performance of militarised masculinity does nothing for women or nothing to correct inequalities and injustices. While Claire enters the space men have occupied, she is unable to challenge women's place under the sovereign power, and the place of the influenced state under the influencing state.

I have also argued that in *House of Cards* "statecraft as mancraft" is heteronormative. To make Frank more interesting and controversial, he can express queer subjectivity in the private sphere, but in order to reaffirm statecraft as mancraft; he is portrayed to always be in control. It follows that the viewer can see how gender is performed, and how spheres of influence are enacted through mancraft, but there is no queering of international politics in *House of Cards*, regardless of queer themes. For Frank Underwood, gay rights are Russia's internal matter – the sovereign man stands above its citizens.

To perform mancraft is to construct the public sovereign man against the feminised figures. Frank sees Corrigan, the gay rights activist, imprisoned in Moscow, as weak, because he fights for a cause, and not for power. Because the viewer always follows Frank's perspective, Corrigan's unwavering commitment and suicide are framed as irrational and passionate. In contrary, Frank's urination on a gravestone and Claire's in front of the Russian ambassador are presented as acts of the able-bodied – memorable signatures of mancraft. The urination marks the body of the state as able, as gendered. The omnipotence and superiority of militarised masculinity genders spheres of influence through control, alleged protection and interventionism.

Spheres of influence are about the state. They are about sovereignty and pushing its limits. *House of Cards* presents the state in human form – as a *bodily state*, a manly great power. The *bodily state* or the stately body moves in a choreography, which normalises *power over*. In other words, the series aestheticises *power over* in the movements of human bodies. Thus, *House of Cards* reinforces a militarised ideal of *power over* in the everyday practices in and around the White House and in the form of spheres of influence.

Emphasising borders, sovereignty and militarism make spheres of influence a practice of violence. Spheres of influence become an outlet and an instrument for the hunger for power which Frank, Viktor and Claire embody. Inter-state relations are simplified to a chessboard game; relations among states are hierarchically static, defined by domination by the fathering great power. Claire's attempt to manifest agency through the United Nations fails. An intergovernmental organisation is nothing compared to two men in a room or a bunker. Hence, the privileging of state sovereignty is reproduced through the performance of gender in the movements of Claire, Frank and Viktor. This results in an imagery where Russia's human rights violations are contained as domestic, women are tamed, and militarist performance dominates political decision-making. By masculinising order while feminising anarchy, the militarised logics of great power responsibility then contribute not just to injustice between states but to the subordination of marginalised people, in particular.

This article has tried to show how gender relates to the policy of sphere of influence at the policy-making level, and through the gendered anthropomorphication of the state. In order to understand better how spheres of influence affect the most vulnerable in a given society, additional research on the relationship between spheres of influence and everyday experiences are needed.

## Notes

1. Michael Horton (2009, 25) describes the suzerain in relation to its vassals, rescued from peril and war, as a loved and revered father.
2. On colonisation, see Mohanty (1988).
3. See also Macmillan (2011). On militarisation, see Basham (2011) and Åhäll (2016).
4. The BBC series is set after the end of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
5. Season 6 will be the last of *House of Cards*, but without Kevin Spacey, who has been accused of sexual harassment by actor Anthony Rapp, followed by several members of the *House of Cards* crew. Spacey will have no role in the last season, but instead, Netflix has announced that the season will focus on Claire Underwood played by Robin Wright.
6. The bodily choreographies of politicians are read as significant enactments of stately relations beyond television. The memes, GIFs and videos of Donald Trump's hand-shakes have become a phenomenon, interpreted as signs of Trump's rudeness as well as bodily gestures of

how world leaders disapprove of him. Freedman, in a Guardian article, refers to body language as “a form of warfare”, arguing that Trump’s hand- shakes gesture superiority, and responses to them, planned resistance; Freedland (2017).

7. Another feminised character is Carrie Mathison in *Homeland*. See Zalewski (2015).
8. In season 5, Claire becomes a murderer too, unexpectedly poisoning her lover Tom Yates.

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