



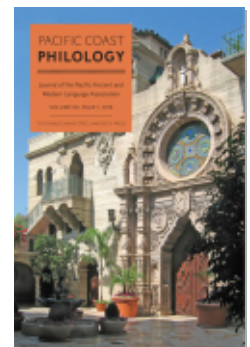
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Framing War



The Politics of Embedded Reporting in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*

CATHERINE IRWIN

Abstract: In the years following September 11, 2001, critical perspectives about the Iraq War were censored in mainstream media by a type of journalism called “embedded reporting,” which structured the narratives about the Iraq War in support of the U.S. military effort (Butler 2009, 64). This article examines how Brian Turner’s 2005 book of poems *Here, Bullet* reflects the way embedded reporting framed the Iraq war during this period. Through close readings of four pairs of poems in *Here, Bullet*, this article shows how Turner’s poetry reiterates the embedded reporting that framed the war effort as a fight against terrorism, while also exposing the shared albeit unequal precariousness of both Iraqis and Americans in Iraq. In the process, this essay argues that, by providing representations of this unequal precariousness, *Here, Bullet* suggests that the war effort is maintained by sustaining military Orientalist norms of recognition for grieving and valuing bodies. More specifically, the soldier-speaker in these poems exposes the way American soldiers are disciplined within a military culture that views itself as a civilizing force with norms about who to value and mourn.

Keywords: embedded poetry; precarity; post-9/11 poetry; Brian Turner; Orientalism

*It happens on a Monday, at 11:20 am
as tower guards eat sandwiches
and seagulls drift by on the Tigris River.
Prisoners tilt their heads to the West
though burlap sacks and duct tape blind them.*
—Brian Turner, “Eulogy”

As the only poem in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* that alludes to the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, the five lines that begin "Eulogy" suggest that the poem as a eulogy will acknowledge the suffering and death of Iraqi prisoners of war; instead, the poem becomes a eulogy for an American soldier named Private Miller who commits suicide. The question of why "Eulogy" juxtaposes an image of Iraqi POWs to an image of an American soldier's suicide is central to the critique of representations of Americans and Iraqis in a book celebrated as "the first single-authored collection of poems to come out of a personal experience of the Iraq War—a fact that makes Turner America's first major soldier-poet of the 21st century" (Najmi 56). Published in 2005, this book in many ways reflects the censorship of critical perspectives about the war carried out during this period by "embedded reporting," a type of journalism that reiterates government and military perspectives by restricting the viewer's gaze to certain acts and narratives that support the war effort (Butler 2009, 64).¹ Unlike embedded reporting, however, Turner's book provides a glimpse of the violence left out of media reports about the war. As a former U.S. Army staff sergeant who wrote most of *Here, Bullet* while on duty in Iraq in 2004, Turner seems fully aware of his own complicity in the Long War as he has called himself an "embedded poet," which he states is "almost like an embedded reporter."² This paper explores how Turner's work reiterates the embedded reporting that framed the war effort in Iraq as a fight against terrorism, while also exposing the shared albeit unequal precarity of Iraqis and Americans.³ Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* argues that "vulnerability is always articulated differently, that it cannot be properly thought of outside a differentiated field of power, and, specifically, the differential operation of norms of recognition" (44). Focusing on four pairs of poems that display this "differentiated field of power," this paper argues that the speaker in *Here, Bullet* suggests that the war effort is maintained by sustaining a post-9/11 form of military Orientalism that includes norms of recognition for mourning and valuing bodies. More specifically, the speaker shows how American soldiers are disciplined within a military culture which views itself as a civilizing force with norms about who to value and mourn.

Most studies on American poetry and Orientalism focus on modernist or post-World War II poetics rather than on post-9/11 poetics and newer forms of Orientalism.⁴ This essay contributes to the discussion of post-9/11 American poetry by exploring how the discourse of the "war on terror" that is manichean, if not Orientalist, in its rhetoric finds its way into poetic representations about the Iraq War, and how this discourse enacted by Turner's embedded poetry impacts the attempt to reframe the encounters between Americans and Iraqis.⁵ Other twenty-first century American poets, among them Kent Johnson and Philip Metres, have also written poems about the Iraq War, but

the majority of poets like Johnson and Metres do so as civilians. Moreover, in contrast to Turner, poets such as Johnson and Metres, especially, tend to shift away from a “poetry of witness” toward what Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray call an “engaged poetry” that “interrogate(s) the notion of a fixed or reliable speaker” (8) and “say(s) what happened while enacting the obstacles to doing so” (15).⁶ As will be discussed in this essay, while the work of Turner, Johnson, and Metres strategically deploys what Linda Hutcheon calls the “paradox of postmodern complicitous critique” (9), Turner’s work attempts to critique the war effort by exposing its norms of recognition but within the discourse of a post-9/11 military Orientalism.

This essay uses the term *Orientalist* and *Orientalism* to situate the study of Turner’s text and its representations of the Middle East within a conversation that both cites Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and also critiques Said’s idea of an unchanging Orient and “the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (300). In *Orientalism*, Said shows how British, French and American scholarly and cultural production establishes and maintains this binary of traditional Orientalism.

Recent scholarship, however, sheds light on how the discourse of traditional Orientalism interacts with newer forms of Orientalism deployed after the 9/11 attacks.⁷

In the aftermath of 9/11, while the Western media disseminated reports of acts of terror and “demonized cultural representations and raced and gendered depictions of Muslims and Islam” (Amir-Khan 1598), representations of the U.S. military’s response seemed restricted in stark contrast. In his critique of U.S. responses to the 9/11 attacks, Kenichi Yamaguchi suggests that America’s military apparatus has relied on “concealed violence” to maintain its domination and to meet more contemporary forms of resistance by the East (247). Yamaguchi suggests that “concealed violence” is a feature in what Patrick Porter calls “military Orientalism” which reckons with “the dynamics of cultural perception within a complex set of relationships, as opposed to a coherent single ideology, or as opposed to the approach of Said, who defined [Orientalism] as a continuous ‘system of ideas’ and ‘imaginative geography’” (14).

Influenced by Agamben’s notion of sovereign politics, Yamaguchi argues that this “concealed violence” carried out by the military includes “four inter-related categories of Othering: (1) commensurable Other; (2) exterior Other; (3) bare life; and (4) incommensurable enemy” (247). Of these four categories of Othering, military conquest relies on “bare life” Othering which refers to the “unconditional violence exercised on citizens” and viewing the Other as “the incommensurable enemy,” which “refers to the aggressive tactics of violence

by which the advantaged side does not aim to assimilate or indoctrinate the Other but to conquer them” (249). An analysis of *Here, Bullet* suggests that, while Turner’s work emphasizes the political imperative of representing America as a civilizing force, Turner seems to disagree with the hegemonic interests of the state: unlike embedded reporting, Turner’s poetry exposes rather than conceals the violence of a post-9/11 military Orientalism and the precarity of “certain populations . . . differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 25).

Most book reviews of Turner’s *Here, Bullet* avoid addressing the issue of military Orientalism, representing the Other, and embedded reporting altogether by focusing instead on Turner’s “nonpartisan” or generally apolitical stance.⁸ At the same time, when the issue of representation is addressed, the encounter between Americans and Iraqis is treated ahistorically. For example, James Gleason Bishop writes, “*Here, Bullet* gave more or less equal treatment to American soldiers, Iraqi soldiers, and Iraqi civilians” (300). *American Poetry Review* critic Michael Broek touches upon the question of empire and representation in Turner’s book:

These are poems of the outsider, the invader, shocked by a new land, a new language, and new experience. In a sense, *Here, Bullet* is ironically a provocative study in post-colonialism and its aftermath, multiculturalism. These are bloody poems, to be sure, but where they succeed they do so because they discover something about the “Other,” not necessarily about the speaker. (35–36)

Broek’s review points out the postcolonial qualities of Turner’s book, but refrains from suggesting how the “invader” perspective impacts images of the “Other.” In contrast, this essay suggests that what is discovered about the Other in many of the poems is always already within a political field of Western discourses that constructs the self against representations of the Other.⁹ For example, in “The Al-Harishma Weapons Market,” the speaker introduces a “Black marketeer or insurgent” named Akbar:

Akbar wraps an AK-47 in cloth.
Grease guns, pistols, RPGs—
he slides them all under the countertop.

Black marketeer or insurgent—
an American death puts food on the table,
more cash than most men earn in an entire year.
He won’t let himself think of his childhood friends—
those who wear the blue uniforms

which bring death, dying from barrels
he may have oiled in his own hands. (18)

In these lines, the speaker introduces Western readers to an Iraqi who seems to care only about his family's economic survival, while being indifferent to how his actions kill both friends and Americans because "an American death puts food on the table, /more cash than most men earn in an entire year" (18). The lines create a poetic landscape that reckons with what Agamben has called "the politicization of life" in which the "absolute capacity of the subject's body to be killed forms the new political body of the West" (125). In the next stanza, however, Akbar is marked as "civilian," a good family man who "carries his four year old Habib to bed under glow-in-the-dark stars arranged on the ceiling" and comforts his son by telling him that the gunfire is "*just the drums, a new music*" (18; Turner's emphasis).

Altogether, what is represented in these lines is Akbar's complicated life. While the speaker's depiction of Akbar selling weapons and killing Americans shows the reality of what the American soldier faces on a daily basis as a result of the economy of war, it also provides us with Akbar's own reality: he is a desperate, insurgent Iraqi husband and father trying to survive as a result of the U.S. invasion, desperate enough to rebel against his own government and kill Americans to put food on the table. The speaker's representation of Akbar points to ways that the labor of war turns subjectivity into a precarious proposition, as Akbar's way of life holds out the promise of a monetary reward and the good life in exchange for an American body.¹⁰

The poem that faces "The Al-Harishma Weapon's Market" further illustrates both the effects of precarity and also what it means to act when a shared vulnerability becomes a shared fear of each other. In contrast to the depiction of Akbar's desperate reality, the speaker in "What Every Soldier Should Know" describes the dangerous reality of American soldiers and what they must do to survive:

If you hear gunfire on a Thursday afternoon,
it could be for a wedding, or it could be for you.
Always enter a home with your right foot,
the left is for cemeteries and unclean places.

O-guf! Tera Armeek is rarely useful.
It means *Stop! Or I'll shoot.*

Sabah el khair is effective.
It means *Good morning.*

Inshallah means *Allah be willing*
Listen well when it is spoken. (19)

In these couplets, the speaker discursively constructs the U.S. soldier in contrast to the Iraqi by showing how soldiers are trained to be, literally, polite (19). The speaker gives advice to soldiers by introducing them to the vagaries of their situation and teaching them (as well as the reader) proper ways of entering Iraqi homes and basic language skills, suggesting in the process which phrases are “effective” (“Good Morning”) and which phrases are “rarely useful,” such as “Stop! Or I’ll shoot” (19).

As the poem continues, however, the speaker also describes what American soldiers experience: graffitied walls sprayed with “I will kell [*sic*] you, American”; bombs and artillery ready for them anywhere they may go; “men who (will) earn eighty dollars to attack you, five thousand dollars to kill”; men, women, and children ready to “dance over your body tomorrow”; and men “rigged with explosives” ready to walk up to you (19–20). As poems placed right next to each other in this book, “The Al-Harishma Weapons Market” and “What Every Soldier Should Know” set up an Orientalist binary between the good, civilized American soldier and the insurgent Iraqi, while providing details about daily life in Iraq and how soldiers are ordered to act in a country that “hates” them.

At the same time, the speaker in these poems shows *how* individuals are compelled to act and depend on each other when situated in this military structure. As Butler writes, “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the Other” (2009, 14). Turner’s work frames both the Iraqis and Americans as interdependent social beings, both expendable and vulnerable in this economy of war. Yet, by emphasizing that Americans are “taught” to act polite, the speaker is exposing the racialized performativity of this binary relationship: the acts of the Arab and American are acts that both sides must repeat within this economy and discourse of military Orientalism and war in order to maintain and disseminate it—and survive. In other words, this discourse and economy make both bodies—Arab and American—recognizable, but also disposable, especially if they fail to perform and “fit” the frame.

While most reviewers and literary critics avoid exploring how Turner’s poems display and expose this dominant discourse of military Orientalism, critics who do address the racial performativity suggest that Turner’s work breaks the East-West binary. In “The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet*,” Samini Najmi notes that the speaker maintains the “humanity” of both the speaker and the Iraqi, for Najmi argues that Turner “finds ways of minimizing the speaker’s white military subjectivity in order

to preserve his own individuality,” and that “given the interdependence and co-construction of identities, this sense of his own humanity depends upon his acknowledgement of the humanity of the Iraqi people around him” (75). Najmi asserts that this “minimizing” takes place through “detached’ narrative descriptions” and by whiteness going “unnamed” (59–61). However, Aaron Baker suggests that this “instinct to decenter the subjective I, to sympathetically enter into the experience of others, is admirable, but the poems which do this seem cursory and ill-suited to the minimalistic, perceptually immediate approach that serves Turner better elsewhere” (“Brian Turner: Poetry’s Embedded Soldier”). To build on Najmi and Baker’s ideas, this paper proposes that the speaker in *Here, Bullet* reckons with his own complicity with power and domination by acknowledging the inability of the West to mourn Iraqi bodies.¹¹

At the same time, this paper also suggests that, while there is the movement to decenter white male subjectivity and acknowledge the humanity of the Iraqi people, representations of the West’s domination over the East are rarely questioned in Turner’s work; rather, when a soldier’s white male subjectivity is decentered, it is done to illustrate the American soldier as a civilizing, moral force. For example, in the first section of Turner’s book of poems, the speaker seems to set up a binary that emphasizes, as Philip Metres points out, the suffering and vulnerability of the American soldier (“The Iraq War,” 352).

What is not fully explicated by critics is *why* the emphasis is placed on a soldier’s suffering and how this relates to the speaker’s complicity and critique of the war. Roger Luckhurst suggests that post-9/11 representations of the American soldier in mainstream media may reflect the very divisions about the war:

The politics of war remains intensely divisive, and, for the American public, the sympathies deeply confused. Fighting a war of vengeance in the rhetoric of liberation, a war ultimately premised on either fabricated or manipulated intelligence, American soldiers have been portrayed as victims of a merciless military-industrial complex or a dastardly Arabic resistance, but also simultaneously as ignorant “grunts” and perpetrators of uncountable death among noncombatant civilians. The military provided its own traumatic iconography of the logic of occupation in the images of Abu Ghraib. (721)

While Luckhurst implies that the varied representations of American soldiers ultimately serve the multiple perspectives about the war, what must be critiqued is *how* these representations of American soldiers are framed alongside representations of Iraqis.

To explore the violence of military Orientalism and the dynamics of this East-West relationship, this paper analyzes a set of poems that are placed side

by side with each other in Turner's book to show how this ordering of poems constructs and exposes relationships of power between Americans and Iraqis: the order of the poems in this book exposes a vulnerability-with-a-difference in the encounters between Iraqis and Americans and a hierarchical framework for valuing and grieving over bodies.

Precarity with a Difference: (Not) Identifying with the Other

By displaying this vulnerability-with-a-difference, *Here, Bullet* illustrates how Americans are differentiated from Iraqis in this economy of war, inevitably exposing how Turner's embedded poetry/reporting impacts our knowledge of war and the way we view the actors within it. In her analysis of how framing the Iraq War disciplines affect and who we grieve and value, Judith Butler focuses on the way embedded reporting played a role in the "media's agreement not to show pictures of the war dead, our own or their own, on the grounds that it undermined the war effort and jeopardized the nation" (2009, 26). Unlike embedded reporters, however, Turner displays war casualties in a medium whose primary purpose is not reporting, but the making of lyric.¹² Turner's work is comparable to the "poetry of witness," which addresses "conditions of extremity" (Forché 29), but raises questions about the "impossibility of *objective* witness and of *subjective* wholeness" (39, emphases original).¹³

What complicates the framing of war in many of Turner's poems relates to this "impossibility of *objective* witness and of *subjective* wholeness," as the soldier-speaker's identification with the Other serves to further differentiate and create a hierarchy of bodies. In one audio interview, for example, Turner discusses the genesis of his poem "Eulogy" (mentioned in this article's introduction): while at a military parade after arriving home in 2004, Turner listened to a brigade colonel give a speech and recite the names of soldiers who had died in Iraq, but "didn't mention the name of a man in (his) platoon who had killed himself over there."¹⁴ Turner states that he is "certain to this day that it's because he didn't die an honorable death; he didn't die a soldier's death."¹⁵ Turner reveals in this interview how the military devalues certain bodies within its own culture.

One can see, however, that "Eulogy" takes this military differentiation one step further, as the speaker creates a more complex understanding of the way both American and Iraqi bodies are dehumanized and devalued. In "Eulogy," the speaker alludes to the tortured Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib when describing "prisoners" who "tilt their heads to the west/though burlap sacks and duct tape blind them" (30). However, rather than describe what happens to these blind-folded and sacked prisoners, the speaker describes the

suicide of a “Private Miller” who “pulls the trigger/to take brass and fire into his mouth” (30) and how this sound impacts the environment:

the sound lifts the birds up off the water,
a mongoose pauses under the orange trees,
and nothing can stop it now, no matter what
blur of motion surrounds him, no matter what voices
crackle over the radio in static confusion,
because if only for this moment the earth is stilled,
and Private Miller has found what low hush there is
down in the eucalyptus shade, there by the river. (30)

From one perspective, this positioning of dehumanized Iraqi prisoners next to the suicide of an American soldier emphasizes the psychological impact that the war has on American soldiers as a result of the demands of war. Consequently, in a poem that begins by describing Iraqi prisoners at a POW camp, the speaker redirects our gaze from the torture of Iraqi prisoners to another kind of torture. Yet, the speaker paints a beautiful, visceral image in which the sound of the bullet that kills Miller seems to wake up nature and transcend the “voices crackl(ing) over the radio in static confusion” as the “earth is stilled” when Miller finds peace at last.

The result is an image that reworks Stephen Eisenman’s “pathos formula of beautiful suffering” in order to accommodate the suicide of the American soldier (111). In *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, Eisenman uses the term “pathos formula” to describe “the motif of tortured people and tormented animals who appear to sanction their own abuse” found in Western classical art and in contemporary media images such as the Abu Ghraib photographs (16). Eisenman argues that the pathos formula manifests itself in the Abu Ghraib photographs, for Iraqis are represented as “not just subordinate, but abject and even inhuman,” which thereby justifies the torture from a military perspective (16–17). In contrast to focusing on the “pathos formula of beautiful suffering” of Iraqi POWs, the speaker in “Eulogy” represents the beautiful end of suffering for Private Miller and suggests, through the juxtaposition of Iraqi POWs and this American soldier, that it is the U.S. soldier who has suffered and been psychologically tortured by the demand placed on him or her to torture and kill others.

At the same time, while Turner restricts the viewer’s gaze to certain acts and narratives of torture, he opens up the frame to include Iraqis in poems like “Eulogy,” thereby exposing a hierarchy of suffering bodies in the Iraq War. By placing Private Miller’s dead body in relationship to Iraqi POWs, the poem “Eulogy” provides a poignant glimpse of those bodies—both Iraqi and American—which have been marked as abject, lacking in value and potentially

ungrievable from a military perspective. Moreover, by repositioning bodies and focusing on a soldier's suicide within a frame that juxtaposes the suffering of both American and Iraqi, "Eulogy"—which ends with the words "PFC B. Miller (1980–March 22, 2004)"—asks readers to identify with the U.S. soldier's suffering rather than the suffering of Iraqis, thereby maintaining the fantasy of the United States as a moral force, even while presenting the Iraqi prisoners as figures of dehumanization.¹⁶

The fantasy of America as a civilizing, moral force is implicitly challenged, however, by the epigraph that faces "Eulogy." As an insert that marks the book's next section, "Chapter II," this epigraph by Fadhil Al-Azzawi makes Iraqis seem almost indifferent to war and death, while simultaneously insinuating the need to mourn bodies killed and left forgotten by the West:

This is war, then: All is well.
The missiles bomb the cities, and the airplanes bid the clouds farewell.
It is nothing but a corpse which grows and stretches . . .
Between time and time,
Between blood and blood.
All is well. (31)

The decision to have "Eulogy" and Al-Azzawi's untitled poem face each other is peculiarly telling, as it forces readers to compare cross-culturally how bodies are mourned. Whereas the speaker in "Eulogy" mourns Private Miller, the speaker in Al-Azzawi's poem seems to be numbed by war and the overwhelming number of bodies yet to be grieved under the social conditions of war. The first three lines work to define "war" as "All is well" while bombs and airplanes "bid the clouds a farewell" without mourning the "corpse which grows and stretches . . ." (31). In other words, Al-Azzawi's poem suggests that, for Americans and their encounters with Iraqis, the ritual of "farewell" does not enact a process of mourning, but a process of killing, because there is no sense of acknowledging the Iraqis who are dying. By repeating "All is well" at the beginning and end of this poem, this speaker emphasizes a type of "bare life" Othering that represents Iraqis as the "incommensurable enemy" whose "corpse" might never be grieved. The juxtaposition of these poems implicitly addresses a schism in the U.S. rationality for war and the inability to grieve for Iraqis being abused and killed by U.S. military. This framing of war also creates what Butler argues as "certain ways to control and heighten affect in relation to the differential grievability of lives" which inevitably impacts the way the American and Iraqi are constituted (26). Consequently, "Eulogy" and Al-Azzawi's poem

emphasize the ways that framing the Iraq War can simultaneously expose and create a hierarchy of valuable, vulnerable bodies.

This hierarchy seems to drive many of the poems in *Here, Bullet*, particularly in the title poem where the speaker seems to lay out the relationship between self and other. In a *New York Times* interview, Turner told reporter Elizabeth Bumiller that the title poem was “inspired by (his) realization during combat that he was bait to lure the enemy” (“A Well-Written War”). In this poem, the speaker creates a situation to “bait” the enemy, as the speaker “dares” an enemy bullet to kill him:

If a body is what you want
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta’s open valves, the leap
thought makes at the synaptic gap.
Here is the adrenaline rush you crave,
that inexorable flight, that insane puncture
into head and blood. And I dare you to finish
what you’ve started. Because here, Bullet,
here is where I complete the word you bring
hissing through the air, here is where I moan
the barrel’s cold esophagus, triggering
my tongue’s explosives for the rifling I have
inside of me, each twist of the round
spun deeper, because here, Bullet,
here is where the world ends, every time. (23)

Through the use of apostrophe in “Here, Bullet,” the speaker plays with the relationship between the self and other on multiple levels. Jonathan Culler argues that “to apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire” (139).¹⁷ Likewise, in her work on apostrophe in postmodern poetry, Ann Keniston suggests that “through the bravado of the second-person pronoun, [apostrophe] seeks to replace what is known with what is desired” (8). Keniston asserts that what is desired “is concerned . . . with the paradox of otherness, with the often irreconcilable conflict between the desire for others to be made present and the essential solitude of the lyric speaker” (4). Consequently, the use of apostrophe in “Here, Bullet” creates a relationship between the soldier speaker and an enemy bullet that plays into this “paradox of Otherness.” On one level, the soldier speaker displays the constant presence of death since combat can happen anywhere and at any time in contemporary warfare.¹⁸ In daring a

bullet to come and kill him, for example, the speaker describes in minute, bodily details the “insane puncture” of a bullet to his body that gives it “the adrenaline rush you crave” (23).

On another level, however, the soldier-speaker’s use of apostrophe constructs a relationship that emphasizes his illusory control and superiority through words. In this war without a defined “front,” the speaker creates a duel between a bullet and his words, between material violence and discursive violence, with the outcome bending to his desire.¹⁹ The soldier-speaker’s words will always have the last say over enemy bullets, as he writes that bullets will end up “triggering/my tongue’s explosives for the rifling I have inside of me” which will control life and death, as his words are “where the world ends, every time” (23). By suggesting that his words, his acts of representation, will control “where the world ends, every time,” the speaker creates a position of power (however precarious) while rendering the “you” powerless. As a result, the speaker can emphasize both his vulnerability as well as his position/attitude of superiority in facing “the enemy.”

The tone and emphasis on the soldier’s vulnerability and superiority in the title poem has been criticized most notably by Philip Metres, who finds the poem too narrow in scope and perspective: “It is precisely the absence of ‘egalitarianism’ in the Iraq War that goes unmentioned in the poem ‘Here, Bullet’; one feels very strongly the mix of bravado and fear of the soldier, but the bravado is the pose of the warrior, not the civilian” (“The Iraq War,” 352). In his analysis, Metres suggests that maintaining this soldierly perspective “has its limits as a full picture of the Iraq War” because of this focus on the American soldier (352). As Metres writes, “While other poems by Turner—especially ‘2000 lbs.’—are superior for their scope and for including the suffering of Iraqis into the lens, the book suffers from its inability to pull back farther from the experience at the front” (“The Iraq War” 352). Metres’s interpretation suggests that the soldier’s perspective in *Here, Bullet* is not decentered enough from the front to adequately include the suffering of Iraqis.

At the same time, a study of how suffering is enacted in Turner’s work exposes how representations of Iraqi and American encounters serve (or challenge) the discourses that maintain the war effort. “Body Bags,” the poem that follows right after “Here, Bullet,” emphasizes the way encounters between Americans and Iraqis are always already articulated within a “differentiated field of power” (Butler 44). In this poem whose genesis, according to Turner, comes from witnessing an act of retribution, American soldiers “stand over the bodies— / who look as if they might roll over, / wake from the dead and question us / about the blood drying on their scalps, / the bullets lodged in the back of their skulls” (24).²⁰ The speaker clearly marks the dead bodies as Iraqis in the second half of the poem when the speaker summons up the dead Iraqis:

to ask where their wives and children are
this morning, why this hovering
of flies, the taste of flatbread and chai
gone from their mouths as they stretch
and rise, wondering who these strangers are
who would kick their hard feet, saying
Last call, motherfucker. Last call. (24)

While “Body Bags” provides a glimpse of the suffering and humanity of Iraqis, the speaker also suggests that the soldiers’ actions in this poem are justified because of their situation, as presented in “Here, Bullet,” the poem that immediately precedes it. By speaking for Iraqis and positioning the American soldiers as “standing over” the dead Iraqis, the speaker once again reifies the differentiated norms of recognition within the discourse of military Orientalism that calls for violent Othering.

Lyrical Violence, Complicity, and Mourning in “Night in Blue” and “Caravan”

Just as there are poems in Turner’s *Here, Bullet* that emphasize the suffering of American soldiers and thus present their acts of violence as justified and even righteous, there are also poems that expose the complicity of American soldiers in racialized violence and the circumstances that drive the relationship between U.S. soldiers and Iraqis. In the last section of *Here, Bullet*, poems such as “Night in Blue” expose the military culture’s inability to replace violence with mourning the dead, as the speaker tries to find meaning in his involvement with the war effort and its cost in corpses:

Has this year made me a better lover?
Will I understand something of hardship,
of loss, will a lover sense this
in my kiss or touch? What do I know
of redemption or sacrifice, what will I have
to say of the dead—that it was worth it,
that it made any sense?
I have no words to speak of war.
I never dug the graves in Talafar.
I never held the mother crying in Ramadi.
I never lifted my friend’s body
when they carried him home. (70)

In his answers to his questions, the speaker reveals his lack of experience with rituals of mourning, whether by speaking at a eulogy, digging a grave, comforting the mourners, or lifting the dead into a casket or body bag (70). These acts suggest a concern for not just the dead, but the suffering of Iraqi civilians left behind as a result of violent Othering. And while his questions address loss, sacrifice, and love, the speaker's response to his questions grapple with the obligation to mourn the Other and hints at the lack of rituals of mourning on the American side.

The poem "Caravan" that faces "Night in Blue" interrogates this lack of mourning even further and suggests that, in lieu of rituals of mourning, America merely moves forward by maintaining U.S. hegemony through acts of violent Othering. In "Caravan," the speaker describes "the long queue of container ships" that "stand at anchor in the Persian Gulf. / They carry .50 caliber machine guns / in packing grease, dunnage, ammo crates, / millions of bullets laid side by side, / toilet paper, insecticides, light bulbs" (71). However, rather than show how these goods and resources are being used as a civilizing force, the speaker places us in Bagdad, where a bomb explosion kills "forty-seven and wounds over one hundred" and creates the need to "gather body parts from the roadway / to collect in cardboard boxes" (71). The mention of ammunition implicates America in the death toll; however, the speaker emphasizes how these bodies collected in cardboard boxes will not be mourned: they "will not be taped and shipped / to the White House lawn, not buried / under the green sod thrown over, box by box / emptied into the rich soil of silence" (71). At the end of the poem, the speaker further contrasts these bodies that lack burial with the valued body of the American soldier by emphasizing how "a Marine sentry stands guard / at the National Monument, Tomb of the Unknown / our own land given to these, to say / if this is freedom, then we will share it" (71). The speaker acknowledges that burial and mourning is preserved for soldiers who have died (a soldier's death) in war and earned the right to be buried in the West. Such rituals of mourning and burial, as Judith Butler argues, give bodies their value as subjects and render them worthy enough to be grieved.²¹

This valuing of bodies is what is at stake in Turner's framing of the Iraq War. However, rather than explicitly address this in the last poem, "To Sand," the speaker addresses the "skeletons of war" in the same way he addresses death and the "language of blood" in the first poem of *Here, Bullet*: by sending them "to sand" (73). The speaker seems to suggest that this power to decide which bodies are valuable enough to be mourned and buried allows the U.S. soldier the freedom to move even in death, while the Arab remains in a fixed position as the subordinate, unmourned other. Consequently, "Caravan" suggests that the body is discursively constructed

within a field of power relations that reflects the norms of recognition within the dominant discourses of post-9/11.

Conclusion: Situating the Embedded War Poet in Twenty-First-Century American Poetry

The problem of representing the Iraq War has been addressed most recently by way of valuing literature and films that either resist or interrogate the stance of the direct witness. Roger Luckhurst argues that “the resistance to narrative or representation of this contemporary war means that cultural narratives about it are often displaced or filtered through the iconography of prior wars” and suggests that “this refraction is the *only* way of grasping war in its contemporaneity” (Luckhurst’s emphasis 722). Luckhurst suggests that these “refractions of the polytemporal” address the challenge of reproduction, subjectivity, and perspective, as he concludes: “It might be that the less often cultural works appear to address the Iraq War, the more often it actually does” (734). Similarly, in their 2012 anthology *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology*, Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray write, “Contemporary engaged poems tend not to espouse a state or stance of witness. In fact they often insist that their speakers have *not* directly witnessed or participated in the events they describe. They reveal, in short, a distance between events and subjectivity” (6). By decentering the position of the direct witness and allowing for a much larger field of perspectives and interpretations, Luckhurst as well as Keniston and Gray emphasize the way that framing an event is a performative act that can be made and unmade through the perspective and interpretation of the framer.

What makes Turner’s framing of the Iraq War risky is the difficulty in decentering and questioning (or “unmaking”) the reporting of a white male soldier/embedded poet and his representations that speak for and about Iraqis. The speaker in Turner’s poems, for example, never explicitly critiques U.S. policy or particular military acts of concealed violence, making it hard to assess to what extent the reproduction of Orientalist binaries is a conscious act of complicity in these poems. In contrast to Brian Turner, poems about Abu Ghraib by Kent Johnson and Philip Metres decenter the direct witness and explicitly question military violence. Johnson’s “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz, or: ‘Get the Hood Back on’” and Metres’s “Testimony (After Daniel Heyman)” are dramatic monologues—solo performances in the voice of a person other than the poet—that attempt to represent the abuses at Abu Ghraib and challenge representations of America as a civilizing force. For example, Johnson’s “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz” contains six short monologues in the voice of five

American prison guards and one American poet that begin in civil, friendly tones (“What’s up, Ramal,” “Welcome, Kamal,” “A Pleasure to Meet You, Khafif,” etc.) and a brief all-American biography of each speaker. However, the monologues of the prison guards proceed to unravel as each guard describes to a prisoner how he or she will be tortured:

What’s up, Ramal, I’m an American boy, a father, two children, a graduate of Whitman High, where I was a member of the Science Club and Student Council, then I got to be the youngest elected officer ever in the history of my town’s Rotary Chapter, I’m in charge of fundraising, which hasn’t been easy the past few years, what with the economy and all, but we’re hanging in there. I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, because I don’t want to assault your sensibilities, or anything like that, but I want to be up front with you because I believe that honesty is the best policy: So I’m going to put a pointed plastic hood on your black and blue head, and then I’m going to stand your caped body on a milk box, with live wires taped to your outstretched hands, and then I’m going to count to ten, you witch-like Arab freak, and maybe I’ll flip the switch and maybe not, it all kind of depends. By the time you get to MI, you’ll be softened up, and you’ll tell us where the terrorists are. (35)

By placing the reader in the position of Ramal, Johnson forces us to consider not only the abusive treatment of Arab prisoners, but also the ways in which poetic representations can reframe a historical event and its meanings. Rather than reproduce and emphasize the demonized representations of Muslims that maintain Orientalism, the speaker, an Abu Ghraib prison guard, exposes American anxieties about identity and power.

Furthermore, the above monologue makes transparent what Michael Peterson calls the “monologue apparatus and various apparatuses of identity privilege” that “work in concert, each tending to strengthen the other”(6). The emphasis on the voice of the speaker in monologues underscores the culturally discursive production of White male identity in which “he-who-speaks is a prevalent trope” (Peterson 6). In Johnson’s monologues, however, the heavy-handed military abuse and violence by the U.S. soldier challenges the fixed, essentialist binary of Orientalism, as the voice of the “American boy” and his construction of a squeaky clean identity slowly unravels into the voice of an aberrant, abusive soldier. As a result, Johnson’s representation of both the American soldier and the prisoner of war reveals the complicity of American soldiers in acts of torture and abuse in contrast to the ways in which American soldiers have been constructed via embedded reporting and other discursive apparatuses. By enacting the struggle to maintain domination and normative control over his Iraqi prisoner, the speaker incorporates into his identity the hate and violence usually

projected onto the Eastern Other and calls into question the idea of the American military as a civilizing force.

Arab American poet Philip Metres's "Testimony (After Daniel Heyman)" also asks readers to reflect on the suffering of Iraqi prisoners caused by U.S. prison guards. "Testimony" is written in the voice of artist Daniel Heyman who accompanied civil rights attorney Susan Burke to the Middle East in order to paint portraits of the male prisoners as they gave their testimonies to Burke (Knight, "Art Review," *Los Angeles Times*). Just as Heyman wrote parts of the prisoner's testimony in the empty spaces around the prisoner's body on the canvas, the voice in "Testimony" speaks as if he were Heyman working on the prisoner's portrait:

How they made the father dig a hole
I have to write very quickly
How they made the son get into the hole
And made the father bury him up to his neck.
I have to write very quickly
So I do not lose the [REDACTED]
And made the father bury him up to his neck
And later ride him like a donkey.
So I do not lose [REDACTED]
Each etched face, each bound body
And later ride him like a donkey—
I sit in a hotel and draw this Iraqi. (62–63)

As an example of an engaged poem, the blacked out words and italicized lines that imitate the speaker in an act of writing down testimony make explicit the speaker's appropriation and erasure of language, the difficulty in speaking about torture, and the obstacles of speaking about someone else's experience.²² The repetition of lines such as "made the father bury him up to his neck" and "later ride him like a donkey" accentuates not only the ways the prisoner was treated as less than human, but also the inexpressible impact that these words have on the speaker. Speaking in the voice of Heyman creates a distance between subjectivity and the event that allows readers to address and critique the concealed violence of Othering. In addition, by placing us in the role of a tortured Iraqi prisoner or as an artist listening to an Iraqi prisoner's testimony, both Johnson, a White American male poet, and Metres, an Arab American male poet, not only implicate us in acts of military violence, but also challenge us to question whether the continuous domination of the Other is justified.

These considerations inevitably lead back to a discussion of the discourses that construct the Iraq War. In his 2007 book *Behind the Lines: War Resistance*

Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941, Philip Metres asks a crucial question: “How does the poet deal with not only the unrepresentability of war but also the politics of representing other cultures, in light of Orientalism?” (15). In his study, Metres suggests the need for *both* soldier poets *and* civilian poets to express their diversity of positions, as he states, “Even if the lyric poem may render visible the political unconscious of imperial privilege, the best lyric poems have always been maps that render empire visible and consciously draw tight the strands that connect American subjectivities to the rest of the world” (*Behind the Lines* 230). Presenting examples of engaged poetry alongside Turner’s embedded poetry show how the portrayals of Americans and Iraqis change (i.e. potentially break the Orientalist binary) when there is a shift in subjectivity and in the way an event is expressed through language. While the work of Johnson and Metres questions representations of America as a civilizing force, Turner’s *Here, Bullet* maintains this representation but, in so doing, allows readers to critique the ways in which Iraqis are valued and left unmourned within the discourse of a post-9/11 military Orientalism. By acknowledging U.S. responsibility for the suffering of Iraqis, these poets bring awareness to the different ways that representations of the Iraq War can be both complicit and critical in its perspective. Published during a historical period in America when embedded reporting censored certain narratives about the Iraq War, Turner’s embedded poems “render empire visible” and make conscious the unequal, differentiated field of power that is present in representations of Americans and Iraqis in the Iraq War. Calling himself an embedded poet, Turner is aware of his own complicity in this war, as he has stated:

I find that it’s easiest for me to think about what’s wrong in the world when I find complicity with myself, so that the poems become a kind of investigation toward that. If I share that, if I am able as the “I”—whatever that is in the poem—to discover some type of complicity, maybe the reader might recognize some of that in their own—or portion of that—in their own life.²³

Perhaps this complicity is what enables Turner to make explicit the norms and discourses that provide the frame in which certain bodies are rendered valuable or not valuable, grievable or ungrievable, bound and unbound to each other in this economy of war.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Seth Michelson, Amy Sueyoshi, and the anonymous reviewer of *Pacific Coast Philology* for his/her insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. See Luckhurst 713–37. Luckhurst also underscores this point in his overview of how Iraq has been represented in the context of media representations of the war: “The U.S. military strategy in Iraq was to allow freer movement but to complexly embed the press corps” (715).
2. See Turner, Pournelle, and Woods. In this audio interview, Turner also discusses the difference between journalism and poetry: “One thing that poets try to do that journalists often try to do the opposite is that we lean into the emotional domain and journalists often try to lean back from that and allow the space to reverberate—if it does for someone.” Other interviews in which he is called an embedded poet include “Brian Turner: Q&A on Being an ‘Embedded Poet’ in Iraq” and Aaron Baker’s “Brian Turner: Poetry’s Embedded Soldier.”
3. This article has been influenced by Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Butler defines “precarious lives” as lives that “can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed” and “precarity” as a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). Other influences include Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray’s “Introduction: Saying What Happened in the 21st Century” in Keniston and Gray’s *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology*; Philip Metres’s *Behind the Lines*; and “Remaking and Unmaking: Abu Ghraib and Poetry.”
4. These studies that focus on or contain a section on modernist or cold war poets include, among others, Davidson, Gray, Kern, Qian, Sielke and Koeckner, Stamy, Westover, and Yoshihara. Among books that include a general discussion about post-9/11 poetry, see Gray, Keniston and Quinn, and Randall.
5. See JanMohamed.
6. This is in contrast to the tradition of World War I poetry and the emphasis on direct experience. Susan Schweik writes that “the British protest literature of combatants such as Owen, Sassoon, and Graves, had sternly insisted upon ‘the authority of experience’ as an absolute prerequisite for war writing, and had memorably indicted women for their naïve, invariably war-mongering lack of authority” (4). Schweik suggests that by World War II, although the Great War poets were still revered, there was a “new readiness of women, a generation later, to talk back to them” (6). Published in 1993, Carolyn Forché’s *Against Forgetting: 20th Century Poetry of Witness* anthologized poems by direct witnesses, 145 female and male poets “who endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the 20th century,” including “torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare and assassination” (29). After 9/11, when Sam Hamill’s website *poetsagainstthewar.org* asked poets to submit poems against the war to his website, it received over 13,000 poems from 11,000 (mostly civilian) writers, crossing racial, gender, and class lines. From this solicitation, Hamill edited and published the 2003 anthology *Poets Against the War*. Another important anthology, *Voices in Wartime Anthology: A Collection of*

Narratives and Poems (2005), edited by Andrew Himes with Jan Bultmann and others, also includes civilian poets, scholars, journalists and doctors from across cultures alongside soldier-writers.

7. See Kumar, Yamaguchi, Nayak and Malone, Amin-Khan, and Samiei.
8. See Brouwer, Dooley, and Byrne.
9. Edward Said emphasized this point in *Orientalism* when he wrote that Orientalism “depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in the discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes or understanding for their effect, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient” (22).
10. For more on precarity and the good life, see Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*.
11. While this essay explores white male subjectivity in the poems of Brian Turner and Kent Johnson, the history of American whites inhabiting and reconstructing the lives of racial and national others has been addressed in other works, including Peterson, Dyer, and Lott, among others. In his book on blackface and minstrel shows, Eric Lott suggests that these performances reflect the complex relationship between working class whites and blacks as a result of a long history of surrogation, impersonation, appropriation and “expropriation” of black culture that challenged the strict binary color lines. Minstrel shows, however, also reflected the contradictory feelings that whites had toward blacks. According to Lott, “Underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear, the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line even as it made possible the formation of a self-consciously white working class” (89). In his study of whiteness, Richard Dyer suggests that whiteness and white domination is dependent on being unmarked in contrast to the racially marked other. As Dyer claims, “The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to ‘see’ whiteness” (46). Consequently, Dyer argues, “What is called for is a demonstration of the virtues of Whiteness that would justify continued domination, but this is a problem if Whiteness is also invisible, everything and nothing” (48). Making visible this dependence of whiteness on racial difference and interrogating justifications for domination potentially expose and challenge Orientalist representations and constructions of the Other, in which characteristics between East and West are supposedly fixed.
12. See Katrovas for his differentiation of reporting vs. lyric in his critique of “the poetry of witness.”
13. The act of reporting, however, can be just as actively involved in circulating dominant perspectives of the Iraq war as poetry, as suggested by the press’s dissemination of Bush’s “either you’re with us, or you’re with the terrorists” speech. See “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation.”
14. “Brian Turner: Q&A on Being an ‘Embedded Poet’ in Iraq.”
15. *Ibid.*

16. In addressing the way embedded reporting framed the Iraq War, Butler argues that the photographers of the Abu Ghraib pictures were “actively involved in the perspective of war, elaborating that perspective, crafting, commanding and validating a point of view” (65).
17. Culler elaborates on this point, stating, “In these terms the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually have” (139).
18. See Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War*. Schweik writes, “By the end of the Second World War, the carpet bombing which culminated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the mass killing which in its extreme form we call the Holocaust, had in one sense rendered meaningless the abstract concept of the ‘front line’” (4).
19. The author wishes to thank Seth Michelson for the phrase “material violence vs. discursive violence.”
20. Turner emphasizes this idea of retribution in his discussion of the genesis of “Body Bags”:

And there was a mortar attack that had killed a captain, a company commander and another soldier in a different unit from ours. I'd spoken with one of their sergeants the next day and he told me—or that day—and he said that by the next day there will be three bodies and he pointed outside the gate, and he said there would be three bodies out there in body bags. You'll see, we'll get retribution. Something like that. . . . Sure enough the next morning when I woke up, not outside the gate, but inside the gate, near where I lived, there were two bodies on the ground. . . . Two soldiers from the other unit walked up, maybe 19 years old or 20 years old. And one of them kicked his feet, kicked the feet of the dead man and told him, said, “Last call, motherfucker, Last call.” And that just really struck me. (*From the Fishhouse: An audio archive of emerging poets*)

21. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*.
22. For a more extensive description of “engaged poetry,” see Keniston and Gray.
23. See Turner, Pournelle, and Woods.

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