

# Silence Amid the Din of War: Sound and Vision in Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* Myra Mendible

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I think that if there is any value in hearing writers talk, it will be in hearing what they can witness to...

—Flannery O'Connor

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**F**lannery O'Connor once explained her "grotesque" larger-than-life characters by remarking that, "to the hard of hearing you shout" (O'Connor 34). O'Connor's literary style eschews the whispers of intimation, innuendo, and subtlety in favor of the hyperbolic, jarring, and strident. Her "amped up fiction" represents "the raised voice by dint of which she seeks to din her audience, amid the silence of reading, into hearing" (Ciuba 1). O'Connor admitted that she aimed to be heard across the distance created by ideological differences, for as she put it, "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can...use more normal means of talking to it; when...it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock" (O'Connor 34). Making noise, in this sense, is a political act: a way to exert authorial power, "speak counter to prevailing attitudes," and break through the reader's "limitations and blind spots" (O'Connor 47).<sup>1</sup> O'Connor's aesthetic demands that readers *hear* her message so they may "see what I have to show" (qtd. in Feeley 45). This synesthetic appeal, in which *sound* (O'Connor's "shout") is used to stimulate *sight* (seeing past "blind spots") relies on vision as a conceptual metaphor for understanding. Hearing, in this sense, breaches the divide between writer and reader, sensory and cognitive, and is key in conveying the writer's vision.<sup>2</sup>

I invoke O'Connor's figurative "shout" as a way to begin thinking about noise/silence as rhetorical devices that can activate readers' perceptual faculties. Focusing on Brian Turner's Iraq war memoir about his service as an infantry team leader with the 3rd Stryker Brigade, *My Life as a Foreign Country*, this essay considers some of the ways that inaudibility, metaphorical and literal, can invoke reflection and judgment, convey trauma, or register complicity. I aim to suggest that silence can work as a defamiliarizing strategy to sharpen vision or enhance awareness.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I argue that Turner's evocation of things silent or muted—hooded prisoners, ghostly figures, dead or broken bodies—as well as his forays into memory and imagination, summon active listening as a bridge to understanding. Silence cues readers to pause, look and listen more carefully. Just as we strain to hear a soft voice—leaning closer or tuning out competing sounds, Turner beckons us to discern what is hushed, silenced or repressed amid the din of war.

Critics have addressed the uses of silence in literature and art in very different ways. As Janet Perez notes, many have become increasingly aware "of the multivalent aesthetic dimensions of silence, and of the complexities of its causes, its uses, and its messages" (116). Some point to distinctions between "the absence of sound when no communication is going on, and silence which is part of communication" (Saville-Troike 4). They theorize silence as one of the forms that a speech act may take, "to question, promise, deny, warn, threaten, insult, request, or command" (Saville-Troike 6). Others focus on the political implications of silencing, or as Cheryl Glenn explains, on the recognition that "the meaning of silence depends on a power differential that exists in every rhetorical situation: who can speak, who must remain silent, who listens, and what those listeners can do" (9). Michelle Cliff, for example, notes "the alliance between speechlessness and powerlessness; that the former maintains the latter; that the

powerful are dedicated to the investiture of speechlessness on the powerless" (5). Feminist critics have called attention to the gendered and racialized aspects of silence, with some women of color posing the problem as not "merely the absence of speaking voices" but the absence of "hearing ears" (Ratcliffe 85). Hearing is thus not simply a physiological act but a receptive mode that engages the listener in a relationship. In contrast, silence can also serve as an oppositional force, a strategic form of communication with the potential to disrupt, rather than enforce, power. As Kennan Ferguson argues, "Silence can serve as resistance to any institution that requires verbal participation (as do virtually all)."<sup>4</sup> The refusal to take an oath, to recant, to self-incriminate, to pledge allegiance, are all forms of resistance through silence.

Silence can also serve as a metaphorical repudiation or rejection of language, authority, or inauthenticity. In "The Aesthetics of Silence," Susan Sontag describes silence as "an ideal plenitude to which the audience can add nothing, analogous to the aesthetic relation to nature" (191). The metaphorical silence to which she alludes—the blank canvas, the empty page—plays a mediating role, invoking its opposite:

If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue. (187)

Thus rather than a cessation of expression, silence initiates an interaction, a hermeneutical process, since "somebody's silence opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech to it." Silence counters a culture of noise—meaningless chatter in an age of inauthenticity, of speech that is "false, inane, ignoble, weightless." Not speaking invites listening,

or at least, it creates the possibility of “feeling more fully one’s physical presence in a given space.” Sontag also posits silence as a metaphor for a “cleansed, non-interfering vision” (191). In this case, language “points to its own transcendence in silence” (192). Silence always depends on the presence of sound elsewhere, she argues, for “one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” (187).

Despite its many rhetorical and aesthetic uses, however, silence is rarely associated with war or its literature. On the contrary, war is noisy—it invades the auditory landscape.<sup>5</sup> Readers are sure to encounter lots of noise in accounts of war: the onomatopoeic sounds of bombs exploding or fighter jets overhead, heavy machinery grinding over land, civilians screaming, and what Turner describes as “the fucks and goddamns and Jesus Christs of the wounded.”<sup>6</sup> This is the din of war that makes us recoil, cringe in horror. In this setting, silence can surprise, evoke suspicion, heighten perception. War also produces another kind of noise: pundits gushing over sensational graphics of smart bombs hitting their targets, loud political speeches invoking fear and hate, dissenting voices clamoring to be heard over megaphones and microphones, shouting matches about policy or strategy, filibusters in the halls of Congress. These comprise what Jodi Berland identifies as the “discourses of power effected by technology, technological processes, mediated social relationships” (41). This is the noise that serves as intermediary of war, or as Barry Truax puts it, the “alienating force that loosens the contact the listener has with the environment, and an irritant that works against effective communication” (94). In war-making, power makes its presence known through noise.

Whereas the absence of sound can stimulate our visionary faculty, noise can overpower our senses and interfere with our capacity to hear clearly; this is the kind of “noise” that confounds or threatens communication, disrupts our ability to understand the messages

transmitted. In this way, noise obscures vision, short-circuits understanding. The audible articulations and byproducts of war intrude, disturb and command. In the literature of war these intrusions alert readers to the integral relationship between sound and forms of communication, control, surveillance, and oppression. Turner's moments of silences or inaudibility in this setting confound this relationship; they can elicit receptivity and response. Not only are readers prompted to try harder to hear but also to comprehend that which is figuratively out of earshot and out of sight. This is an ethical call, a technique that situates readers as witnesses to the events unfolding before them rather than as passive spectators: active listening becomes a call to see, and more specifically—to *recognize*. The etymology of the word "recognition" itself suggests a call to "know again, recall to mind." This implies an act of seeing something anew, acknowledging what was previously unknown, unfamiliar, nebulous.

This kind of recognition stems, in part, from *active listening*. Scholars argue for the importance of active listening in forging connections across cultural and ideological differences, for as Pat Gehrke reminds us, "those which can be placed out of sight, to whom we can avoid listening, can be excluded from our ethical concerns far more easily" (4). Paula S. Tompkins connects what she calls "rhetorical listening" to vision, as we are asked to "recognize those who are present, while also being attentive to traces of the relational connections of Others whose presence is obscured or absent" (69). In her view, "Moral sensitivity informed by a practice of rhetorical listening helps create a space for the possibility of ethical action" (77). This implies "a kind of listening that takes as its purpose a response to greater obligations" (3). Listening with an awareness of "greater obligations" implicates the reader in the events described; it entails not just a cognitive process but also a practice in the ethical constitution of the subject. The term "rhetorical listening," Krista Ratcliffe proposes, is a trope for interpretive invention that signifies

"a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (17). Such listening may help us interpret and "ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can *hear* things we cannot *see*" (25). My approach draws on Ratcliffe's latter point but reverses it to suggest that Turner uses silence as a way to help us *see* or envision things we cannot *hear*.

### The Politics and Poetics of Silence

Turner's rhetorical use of soundlessness is evident from the outset, as he begins his narrative with the disembodied view of "a drone aircraft plying the darkness" from 32,000 feet. Usually associated with the destructive power of American military drone strikes, here the war machine is a silent, detached observer--a machine that does not feel, does not judge—only transmits the image of what it sees: Turner's wife sleeping below, then countries touching countries, "Cumulus scattered above them, their shapes authored by sunlight on the ground beneath" (ix). Like lines on a map, artificial barriers are created by those who generate the loudest noise: discourses that define, differentiate, and separate, or bombs that kill, maim and silence. But in the absence of such noise, there is a natural co-existence ("authored by sunlight"). This soundless observing suggests the possibility of transcending, if only momentarily, the artificial divisions constructed through language, but also the limits of time and space, inviting us into the realm of imagination. Vision is here not only literal but figurative as well—suggesting the possibility of contiguity and connection. In this state of pure vision, unencumbered by noise, language no longer serves to differentiate us from them, friends and enemies, or even the dead from the living, as "scorch marks on the asphalt where transport trucks were left to burn" in Iraq coincide with the "eucalyptus trees" of Turner's childhood, where his "dead Uncle Paul steals oranges in

the night groves there...while fresh earth covers the newly dead on the other side of the highway" (x).

With this opening, in which vision prevails, Turner initiates a journey that will take us not only to the imagistic, boundless space of memory but also towards a vision that sees beyond the politics of the moment, beyond the borders etched on maps through war and conflict, labels, accusations and other noise. But Turner's opening silence signals not only the absence of sound but its displacement: readers need to look elsewhere for what is missing or absent, consider where noise thrives, negates, or supplants. For Turner's use of the drone as a metaphor for an expanded, God-like vision also resonates: the drone is, after all, not omniscient; it does not only suggest boundlessness but also boundaries between those who wield this instrument of power and those who are its targets. While we witness what Turner describes, we are also implicated in a surveillance practiced in our name: America's increasing use of drones in striking targets has claimed the lives of countless Iraqi civilians, its grim silence leaving death and destruction in its wake. These unmanned aerial vehicles, like those who monitor their shadowy images on computer screens hundreds of miles away, do not hear the cries of the dying below, cannot discern the details of a life unrecognized. Theirs is sight devoid of vision, incapable of hearing.<sup>7</sup>

Turner's brief prologue therefore suggests two complementary figurations of silence. In one sense, the drone is simply the receiver and transmitter of visual signals; it reflects a non-judgmental and unfiltered receptivity that creates a space for "listening and hearing as a generative action of perception" to challenge, augment and expand what we see (Voegelin 12). This receptivity allows the observer a "big picture" view—one in which the past and the present are "compressed into the demarcations in the map below" (x). But it also conveys an oblique silence: Turner's readers are keenly aware of the role that drones play in contemporary American

warfare. They know that the absence of noise is precisely what makes drones so deadly; they strike without warning and despite their surveillance capacity, are unable to discern whatever subtle visual differences may distinguish the jihadist from the doting father.<sup>8</sup> This aspect of silence suggests a space “either beyond words or conventionally delimited as left out of what we talk about” (Winter 4). In this figuration, silence is politically enforced and even ritualized; it is part of the framing of distant wars for local public consumption, that which remains unacknowledged (etymologically: unknown) or strategically left unspoken. This is the silence that deflects and defers, a silence of complicity or imperviousness. The subjectivity implied through the drone’s point of view is on the one hand seeking “necessary intelligence,” fulfilling its role as an instrument of surveillance; on the other, Turner shifts this perspective from a drone monitoring “heat signatures in the landscape,” to his personal search to understand “all that I have done,” then again to an incriminating “all that *we* have done” (x emphasis mine).

It is thus fitting that towards end of his prologue, Turner hears owls calling “out for water” from the gravestones of the Iraqi “newly dead” (x). This image recurs throughout the memoir, and it signals an ethical call that goes unheeded by the living—a figurative “droning” that fades into the background despite its urgency (the fact that “fresh dark earth covers the newly dead” suggests that the killing and dying continues). Again in the scene immediately following, the occlusion of ambient noise hones perception: as his Sergeant explains how to “label and keep track of the dead” after an ambush, Turner’s “eyes wander over the grassy field” towards “the early morning light [that] illuminates the translucent nature of the grass in its subtle gesture toward infinity” (3). Tuning out the sound of his sergeant’s voice and the banter of his fellow soldiers, Turner connects this transitory moment to a timeless cycle of nature (the sunlight illuminating the grass). This state of heightened perception stirs Turner’s consciousness,



and he begins to “hear” through his mind’s eye the dead from wars past calling out “with hoarse voices, quietly, asking for a drink of water. A small sip, they say. Just a sip of water” (3). These voices are “hoarse” from their repeated efforts to be heard by the living, their lifeless bodies craving water as a source of renewed life.

Turner hears these whispered pleas throughout his tour in Iraq, yet the war continues unabated. It thus dawns on him that human beings inhabit a “landscape of ghosts,” not only in Iraq, but anywhere that war has left its “harvest of death” behind.<sup>9</sup> At one point, he compares this vision to the way photographers talk about the presence of the dead on the battlefield at Gettysburg whose, “shadows fall among the leaves of grass and the stalks of purple thistleweed.” But this image of dead soldiers extends beyond any specific war, as Turner’s shadows haunt battlefields across time and space: the trenches of the Somme. The beachhead at Anzac Cove. Along the Chicka-hominy River. Vicksburg. Cold Harbor. A spot by the Tigris “the more recent dead from the strafed and bombed Highway I—some glancing across a mist of smoke in silence” (25). The dead cannot speak but their presence signals Turner’s awakening consciousness: he (and we as readers) are implicated in a futile cycle of war and death.

Aware of his increasing isolation and disconnection from civilian life and human relationships, Turner seeks connection through silent intercourse with nature. At one point, he steps outside his tent “to get a breath of air and quiet.” In these moments, he experiences “a distinct sense of the past and the future being erased at the horizon’s edge” as “the circumference of the world retracts” (7). During this interlude, in which nature creates a space for introspection, Turner quiets his mind, finding comfort in silent solitude. The image of the world “retracting” suggests a withdrawal from the temporal preoccupations that characterize human activity. Thus apprehensions about his role as one in a line of soldiers and even his loneliness in

the aftermath of a divorce—fade into a silent communion with the natural world, a communion that contrasts with our incessant preoccupation with what is ultimately ephemeral. Alone later that night he reads Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and again reflects on connections across time and space, realizing that he is, as Aurelius noted centuries before, one of the many "leaves that the wind drives earthward" (7). His quiet contemplation of the natural world had given him a temporary respite from the noise and bustle of human-created alienation and strife, reminding him of a cyclical process of renewal. Silence here opens a space for observation, receptivity, even transcendence from the temporal, the transitory—suggesting the possibility of continuity and regeneration.

Echoing Transcendentalism's appeal for humans to rekindle, in Emerson's words, "an original relation to the universe" (3), poet Wendell Berry describes silent intercourse with nature as a gift that quiets the mind so that we can see "the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments."<sup>10</sup> Berry contends that in these instances, "One's inner voices become audible." But he also acknowledges that these are transitory moments inevitably followed by a return, "From the order of nature" to "the order—and the disorder—of humanity."<sup>11</sup> Turner seems to confirm this movement from silence to noise, from an escape to a re-immersion in human conflict. Following his silent interaction with the natural world, he begins his next chapter with a description of soldiers preparing to head into battle. However, Turner's silent interludes leave traces on his consciousness, for as Berry suggests, following moments of quiet solitude with nature, "one responds more clearly to other lives.... [and enters] more fully...into the communion of all creatures." Thus as Turner awaits the order to roll out, he recalls these words: "Facing us in the field of battle are teachers, fathers and sons/grandsons, grandfathers, wives' brothers;

mothers' brothers/and fathers of wives" (8).<sup>12</sup> This recognition of the humanity he shares with those he is soon to confront in battle registers only momentarily, as sound interrupts and he is called back to a world defined by duty and obligation, back to the "circle of the human," where in Berry's words, "we are weary with striving, and are without rest." Sound once again intrudes, as the soldiers are ordered to "lock and load our weapons, mount up and move out" (8).

The idea of the nation is inseparable from its stories about war. Passed on from one generation to another, these inform collective and personal memories and forge connections across time. Turner's memoir recognizes this slippery slope from the "I" to the "we"—the ways each of us is shaped by the stories that bind us to family and national history. In this sense, Turner's memoir is what Stephanie Patterson calls "a book of inheritances....about legacies....about duty" (22). This "inheritance" includes the war stories he grew up hearing and re-enacting: Turner as an 11-year old wearing his father's "old National Guard uniform" (38); or as a 13-year amateur actor playing a soldier in a movie made with his friends, all "dressed in green army fatigues" with "fake bloodstains on their uniforms and...fake blood smeared onto their faces" (47-8). Thus as Turner explains his decision to join the military, the call to duty stems not from a patriotic desire to serve on behalf of a cause ("the war on terror"), but from a bequest that joins him to a family of soldiers. Turner feels obligated to join the ranks of those who came before him, relatives who served as well as heroes he read about as a child. Joining the military grants him access to a landscape defined by sound: "if I hadn't...it would have meant that between me and the people I revered there were explosions I couldn't hear, curses and shouting and laughter, engines thrumming, Hueys and Blackhawks...surgeons calling for scalpels and sutures and more blood...." (56).

While the men he knows rarely speak of combat, opting instead to describe scenery while "circling the things not talked about" (45), Turner has been initiated into a fraternity maintained by secrets, omissions, and a "liturgical silence" that marks the sacred; he understood the "themes of loss, mourning, sacrifice and redemption" that characterize the stories of war (Winter 4). Thus when Ray, a friend of Turner's father, teaches Turner to play the horn, Turner writes, "I won't ask him about his time as a mortar man in Vietnam. And Ray won't talk about the burned grass...He won't tell me about the bugle he found beside a Vietnamese soldier who stared at him with his dead eyes" (46). Although Turner notes that his grandfather was as "a man of historical silence" (100), his example speaks volumes, bestowing the legacy of soldiering that Turner will continue. Turner admits that he "would've been ashamed in the years to come if I hadn't, even if it didn't make sense, even if nobody I cared about ever thought about it, even if all the veterans in my family never said a word, or even if they did, saying, It's cool, Brian, it doesn't mean a thing, believe me, the uniform doesn't make the man, or anything along those lines" (56). Turner will later find that to some extent, the uniform does "make the man," as he will lose his personal identity to the objectified "look" of those who will see only his uniform, just as he will be trained to see potential "enemies" in all the Iraqis he encounters.

Throughout his tour of duty Turner will appear to others, not as an individual, but "as a foreign country." He is also a character, Sgt. Turner, defined in this case by his rank. In one scene, for example, Turner is charged with guarding a group of Iraqi prisoners. One of the captured men catches Turner's eye, and they stare at each other, their silent communication comprising "one moment in history's vast archive of the unrecorded." He realizes that, "We both live in pens made of wire. I carry an M4, have a boot knife strapped to my flak vest and the American flag silently listening in from the uniform on my shoulder. He's in his man dress,

wearing sandals and shivering in the damp cold" (23-4). The flag "silently listening" is a reminder of the legacy he carries, the duty to which he is bound through blood and nationality.

Later, he notices that two of the prisoners are kept separate from the others, either because they are "high value" or more likely he thinks, because "they have been forgotten within the vast machinery of war" (27). They are "caged in a tiny side room" reminiscent of "a jail cell in the American West, circa 1870"—a "ghost-town cell" (27). Looking at them, he "can barely make out the forms shivering shoulder to shoulder, squatting down, hunched, a couple of pieces of soaked cardboard the only thing between them and the cold concrete" (27). These figures, obscured and silent, are barely perceptible as human beings. Yet, he "can feel their eyes through the darkness. Looking at me. Chiseling into memory the anonymity of the uniform. They can barely distinguish me as a man, either" (27). Ironically, the "either" here suggests that this reductive gaze mirrors his own. Thus a mutual misrecognition—whereby neither side can discern the other's humanity—is another legacy of war. This impaired vision lingers in soldiers' memories, yet it is often left unspoken, like the stories his Uncle Jon would not speak: of interrogation cells in Vietnam, for instance, stories of how "he questioned the prisoners in their blue suits, how they huddled in the cages at the zoo, how they begged" (46).

Turner's attempts to "hear with his mind's eye" momentarily disrupt this dominant framework of war, these rigid "us" versus "them" polarities. Listening in this sense is not merely a physical act but a relationship with another, the invocation of moral consciousness. To listen in this way is "to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the underside of meaning" (Barthes 249). Thus describing preparations for a night raid, Turner momentarily mutes the sound of his soldiers' banter to listen for what is left unspoken: "They don't talk about the people who live in the target house....

They don't talk about the men eating dinner in that house now, the children who run in through the front door, the sound of their laughter as they turn and run upstairs, their mother calling to them from another room" (67). Visualizing the other as an active presence, Turner reminds us that the collective memory of war drowns out the "noisy alterity" of competing voices.<sup>13</sup> In his memoir, memory "is conceived as no longer located solely within the experience of a particular individual but as exceeding the personal, traversing subjects and temporalities" (Cetinic 287). Listening for what has been omitted, silenced, or repressed--complicates meaning, for surely, "America, vast and laid out from one ocean to another is not a large enough space to contain the war each soldier brings home" (173).

"Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land," wrote WWI veteran-poet Siegfried Sassoon, an image that aptly reflects Turner's struggle to understand an inscrutable landscape. Throughout the memoir, dreams serve as a trope for this experience of ambiguity, this "gray land" without discernible meaning or purpose. Following his stare down with one of the prisoners, for example, Turner tries to decipher a dream that begins when a mortar explodes and its "sound waves reverberate outward from the blast" (28). Stuck in slow motion, he sees a camel behind him, nudging him forward,

whispering something, its voice at the twin thresholds of human hearing, low and ethereal all at once, a voice whispered from enormous lungs...a guide to the landscape of dream, a creature I need to know, I think, as I continue to move the way sand is carried over the surface of the earth by wind, away from detonations and the waves rippling outward, away from the soldiers sprinting in slow motion to overhead cover, away. (29)

Here again Turner strains to hear, trying to understand a meaning that seems just below the surface of cognition. But he is awakened once again by war's sonic intrusions, left unmoored in a world that appears even more unreal and illusory than the world of his dreams. He hears "the outgoing booms" of mortar rounds, and listens "for the missiles spinning over the rooftops of the city...the velocity of metal given an irrevocable intention" (30). Indeterminacy is replaced by the unwavering certitude of a missile.

Noise interrupts thought, disables perception; it penetrates, occupies, and overwhelms the body. In these instances, the reader is thrust back into the acoustic turmoil of war, into a language that requires no translation, suffers no semantic ambiguities: the sound of mortars--the "outgoing booms of their cannons" (30); "the reports of M4 carbines and squad automatic weapons" (59); the "sound of the detonations, the crack and airy breath of it all" (15); the machine gunners firing quick bursts in pairs, "*pop-pop, pop-pop, pop-pop*" (59); "the sound of that helicopter riding over the waters. The low thwap-thwap-thwap-thwap of the rotorblades spinning--one of the sounds of death, the machine gun's prelude" (163). A bomb exploding nearby speaks with a "metallic elocution" (59) that registers on the brain "as a type of conversation. The extension of an idea expressed in the physical language of shrapnel" (15). This "physical language" has no use for the abstract, the conceptual, or the imaginary; it communicates with the precision of a hammer to the head.

The sonic language of war leaves its imprint not only on the physical body but also on the psyche of those who hear it. Investigating the effects of the Iraq War's "belliphonic landscape" on military and civilian personnel, J. Martin Daughtry explores "the spectrum of sounds produced by armed combat" (3). Drawing from interviews, blogs by American soldiers, news videos, and other sources, Daughtry suggests an inherent link between sound and

violence, arguing that war's sonic episodes should be understood as "disturbance events introducing forced change in a system" (169). In his view, war's noisiness invades and "conquers" the body (208) resulting in an "inexorable process of sensory impoverishment" (205). This sonic battlefield, Daughtry argues, is a "shadow war of the senses" that potentially creates not only a "trauma zone" (i.e. "the innermost zone of wartime audition" where sounds produce physiological damage) but also an "ethical vacuum" (211). Of special interest here is the contrast he makes between American soldiers' "situational awareness" (the imperative that they be hyper-aware of their environment) and the sensory deprivation imposed on Iraqi detainees:

Situational awareness was precisely the affordance that the US military and intelligence services wanted to deny the large population of Iraqi men who were detained for questioning over the course of the war. The standard technology for achieving this purpose, the hood, was the [Advance Combat Helmet's] affective opposite: it was designed to close off the sensory world rather than open it up, disorient the wearer rather than orient him within his environment, and create an embodied state not of security but of vulnerability. (206)

We know that sound can be weaponized, turned into an *instrument* of power. But most relevant here is the suggestion that audibility "opens up" the world and is thus a *prerogative* of power. What serves as a means of self-preservation and knowledge on the one hand (the imperative to hear), becomes a weapon of deprivation and dehumanization, on the other (the injunction against hearing).

This contrast is best exemplified by two scenes Turner describes, each of which creates an "ethical vacuum." During a night raid targeting what they believe is an Iraqi insurgent's home, Turner's description highlights the effects of extreme "situational awareness." As he runs toward



the house, Turner's body is in a state of hyper alertness: "Adrenaline mutes the world around me until all I can hear is the sound of my own breathing, gear jostling on my flak vest, the dull clanging of ammunition strapped to my chest, impossibly loud, so loud I think the dogs will bark..." (22). In this state, Turner's ethical consciousness collapses into solipsism, as the internal movements of the body, normally drowned out by ambient sound, shut out the world beyond the self. This figurative retraction of the field of consciousness displaces ethical considerations, as he is oriented only by a weapon that ensures his self-preservation, the "M4 pointing the way forward." Turner is attuned only to his target, "as the world funnels in toward the door" (22).

While Turner's audio hypersensitivity in this case stems from privilege, his role as part of an occupying force, the opposite is true for those deprived of the right to choose when, what or whether to hear. The mind-numbing effects of both sensory deprivation and sensory overload can be used to disorient or break down consciousness. This makes sound an important interrogation technique, one used by the US military to systematically "harass, discipline, and in some cases 'break' detainees" and "drown out" their inner thoughts.<sup>14</sup> Turner alludes to this in one scene where he overhears "loud music reverberating from the prisoner containment areas," the "kennels"—metal boxes where sleep-deprived men "were being broken down and changed forever" (74). He says simply, "I never fully appreciated the depth of the cold ...could offer a man's body, the hypothermic value of intelligence. Or the need for sanitary gloves, a rectal thermometer" (74). The reader is left to imagine horrors left unspoken.

In another scene, the soldiers raid a house of suspected insurgents, terrorizing its inhabitants. Turner watches the sergeant yelling at the silent prisoners, sandbags over their heads so they cannot see their tormentor as he screams repeatedly, "All you gotta do is tell. Tell us what you know." Flex-cuffs bind the men's wrists as they kneel in an animal stall, "one of

them sobbing to himself" (17). Hours later the higher-ups notify the soldiers that they've raided the wrong site, and the soldiers will remove the hoods and apologize, "mount their vehicles and roll out." Turner doesn't comment on this absurd miscommunication, does not accuse, opine, or condemn its effects. In both instances noted above, he remains speechless in the aftermath of events that probably occurred numerous times throughout the war—the "enhanced interrogation" of Iraqis, the breakdowns of communication that cost countless lives, the empty gestures and enforced silences that follow. In my view, these silences invite speculation; they are strategic interruptions during which the writer reneges on his implicit promise to tell, to reveal, to expose. In relinquishing his authorial power, so to speak, Turner creates an awkward epistemological void, an aporia that the reader is compelled to resolve through inference, intuition, or interpretation. I would add that such silences also suggest not only his, but our own complicity in these acts. For while most Americans have heard news reports and seen visual evidence of such practices, these too, like the hoarse pleas of Turner's imaginary owls, have not altered the nation's moral landscape.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of traumatic events or recollections, silence expresses a rupture in continuity. Shoshana Felman reminds us that trauma can only be spoken in a language that disrupts linear flow and disrupts the notion of authority or mastery: "testimony [of trauma] seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). Thus Turner's silences often stage an ontology of trauma, of what cannot be spoken. For example, following the suicide of one of the men, words fail his fellow soldiers. They silently pack up the dead man's belongings, and Turner imagines the platoon leader "trying to

formulate the words and sentences for an impossible letter home, words meant to convey our own loss within the platoon and to console a family...." (83). He implies the ineffectiveness of such expressions, the inability to achieve their intended meanings. Any attempt to break the grip of grief and loss with empty gestures or words seems futile, an intrusion on the senses. Turner imagines those who will deliver the message to the family as they stand at their front doorstep, then hears "The sound of the doorbell ringing inside, too shrill, I think, too bright" (83).

Upon Turner's return home, the sounds of celebration and Americana fill his memories: a parade, a Colonel giving a speech he can barely hear "even over the loudspeakers" "one bromide at a time." The brigade listens, motionless, as the "Colonel drifted further and further away on a speech of heroes and sacrifice and nation-building" (158). After the obligatory parades and speeches, Turner feels that he is "witnessing the erasure of a kind of set design, the dismantling of a stage treatment" as the "landscape pulls the vestiges of war under and replaces them with a monument" (159). Silence will prevail—but this time not as a space for listening but as an act of forgetting. Yet Turner will be haunted by memories of death, visions of suicide: a veteran stepping "away from the chair and the rope does its work. Pills swallowed with whiskey or coconut rum.... A pistol or rifle barrel positioned inside the cavity of the mouth" (165). And like voices no one listen to, "high-altitude drones continue their nightly patrols out of earshot above" (165).

In his poem, "Illumination Rounds," Turner describes a dream sequence that affirms the role of the poet as witness: he is shoveling graves for the dead in his backyard, in a futile effort to help them, "if only with a coffin":

We should invite them into our home.

We should learn their names, their history.

We should know these people

we bury in the earth.

In an email interview about this scene, Turner asserts the need to widen the circle of responsibility, especially as Iraqi dead rarely make news in the US. He poses the question, "What does it say about a nation that can wage war and yet know very little about [the enemy]?"

Although he claims that the poem avoids the rant, "the rant is woven into it." This is Turner's version of the "shout" – his poetic voice a whisper that resounds. It demands more of us as readers and as human beings. Perhaps Turner's way of remembering and recording war represents his attempt to escape the solipsistic constructions of personal trauma by seeking threads of connections, affiliative bonds across boundaries of difference, a kind of universality born of shared humanity. This is suggested in his memoir when, on his way back to war after a brief leave, he writes, "I realized then that I carried a desire within me...toward the infinite, something circular, something repetitive, a tether cinched fast to something deep in the well of memory" (126). While language delimits this possibility, his text strains against its own limits, breaching and traversing spaces in the distance between hearing and cognition, the "I" and "not-I."

Turner's tapestry of sound and silence ultimately invokes the reader's role as witness, for to remain detached or acquiescent is to be complicit. He has said that he hopes that his own explicit complicity as the grave-digger in his poem—and by extension, his role in the war itself, might expose the unspoken complicity "within us all. I'm talking about torture," he writes. "I'm talking about a country that must be responsible for what it has done. I'm talking about the country I love. America." While his figurative rants, persistently woven into the fabric of his

poems and memoir, may often be drowned out by the language and machinery of war, Turner's aesthetic still summons us, a voice grown hoarse but not silenced.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> O'Connor felt that she was writing for a "hostile audience," secular readers who were often "blind" to the "truths" imparted by Catholicism. Writing in a letter to her friend Betty Hester, she notes that "the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens...." *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Sally Fitzgerald, Ed. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979: 90.

<sup>2</sup> Sight metaphors usually align the act of seeing with revelation and truth, but hearing also can connote revelation and cognition. Tibor Fabiny, for example, argues that unlike ancient religions, which used the eye as the source of revelation, the Bible repeatedly uses the ear as "the proper organ of religious understanding" and "faithful apprehension of God's word." An inability or unwillingness to hear, on the other hand, signals hard-heartedness or stubbornness caused by sin (190). See Tibor Fabiny "The Ear as a Metaphor: Aural Imagery in Shakespeare's Great Tragedies." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), 11.1 (2005): 189-201. For a linguistic analysis of the metaphorical link between hearing and vision see Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser's *Figurative Language* (Cambridge UP, 2014): 32-24.

<sup>3</sup> Defamiliarization is the English translation of the term "ostranenie" ("making strange") which describes an artistic technique aimed at enhancing an audience's perception by forcing them to see something familiar in a new way. The term was coined in 1917 by the Russian Formalist, Victor Shklovsky. Uri Margolin notes that "Defamiliarization of that

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which is or has become familiar or taken for granted, hence automatically perceived" can slow down "the process of reading and comprehending." "Russian Formalism." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, Kennan. "Silence: A Politics." *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2003): pp. 49. Online.

<sup>5</sup> In Turner's second book of poetry, *Phantom Noise*, the title poem alludes to the "noise" of war as something that lingers in the body's memory, like the persistent "ringing hum" of tinnitus. J. Martin Daughtry's excellent study is one example of studies focusing on what Daughtry calls the "belliphonic landscape" of war. An ethnomusicology and sound studies professor at New York University, Daughtry explores sonic violence in the context of the Iraq War. See *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq*, New York: Oxford UP, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> This is a line from Turner's poem, "The Hurt Locker."

<sup>7</sup> Under the Trump Administration, US use of drone strikes in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia have increased. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism is an independent, not-for-profit organization that monitors US drone strikes and their civilian casualties using both military and local source data. See <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war>

<sup>8</sup> See for example, *The New York Times* investigative report on the Iraqi family mistakenly killed by a US drone strike. In this case, they were sleeping in their homes when the strike occurred, killing all the members of the family except the father—who awoke next to his dead wife with the taste of blood in his mouth. Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, "The Uncounted." Nov. 16, 2017. Online <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html>

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Gardner used this image to describe the scene following the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1 to July 3, 1863): "Through the shadowy vapors, it was, indeed, a "harvest of death" that was presented; hundreds and thousands of torn Union and rebel soldiers--although many of the former were already interred--strewed the now quiet fighting ground, soaked by the rain, which for two days had drenched the country with its fitful showers." See *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*. Mineola, New York: Dover Press, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> "The Larger Circle."

<sup>11</sup> "Healing" in *What are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry*, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The warrior Arjuna speaks these words to Krishna before a great battle in *The Bhagavad-Gita*.

<sup>13</sup> Philipp Schweighauser (2006) uses this term to describe sounds that seem alien or nonsensical for their nonconformity or difference, for example, immigrant accents, working-class crowds, "exotic" music, cheap entertainment.

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<sup>14</sup> See Suzanne G. Cusick, "'You are in a place that is out of the world'": Music in the Detention Camps of the Global War on Terror." *Journal of the Society for American Music*. 2.1 (February 2008): 1-26.

<sup>15</sup> Ironically, Iraq's government, whether through coercion or choice, continues the legacy of silence: a section of Abu Ghraib prison has been refurbished and turned into a museum documenting Saddam Hussein's abuses, but there is no mention of the abuses committed there by American troops and contractors.

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