

COMMENTARY BY LEVI BOLLINGER

A Broader Scope

In the spring of 2012, the Arab League met in Baghdad, Iraq. The streets were clear and broad, freshly renovated buildings glimmered in the still sunshine, and the rubble of war disappeared from view as VIPs, diplomats, and heads-of-state from twenty-two nations met in marbled halls and gilded hotels to discuss the future of a country re-entering a community of nations; Iraq, after all, had been a stranger to the Arab League since its invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

This is a far cry from the Baghdad I saw ten years ago: at that time the roads were crumbled by blasts, the buildings sat splattered with bullet-holes, concrete barriers loomed over the roads, concertina wire bubbled its razors out of streets and over walls, and the scant operating hotels were sealed in a tiny corner of the capital, hidden away in a maze of fortified checkpoints. As my battalion's convoy crawled through the gates of the Baghdad International Airport, which would be our base of operations for the next year, we found ourselves surrounded by signals of war: crumbling palaces, bullet-riddled murals of Saddam, stone walls with holes blasted through them, and piles of rubble strewn everywhere.

In the ten years since the Iraq War began, Baghdad has passed from a capitol mired under a violent dictator to a seething city on the verge of civil war to, today, a modern metropolis commanding economic potential and tentatively asserting its stability to govern and to host a major world event. These transitions have been anything but fluid, anything but easy; they have passed at the price of bloodshed and suffering, of violent tumbles back and arduous steps forward, of personal and national suffering.

The entire process has, from the start, been documented much more meticulously than any war of any previous generation. Front-line access of embedded reporters, live-feed updates around the clock from a half-dozen major media outlets, and an American military more highly equipped than ever before to publish its thoughts to the world have all ensured there would be no shortage of information on the Iraq War. Nor has there been a shortage of analytical writings to emerge from the conflict. Currently, over 2,000 books about the Iraq War have been published in America since the start of the conflict.⁽¹⁾ These range from Paul Bremer's memoir of the war and occupation (Filkins) to a Stephen King novel featuring a returned vet's struggles in a city's sci-fi bubble (Berry) to a collection of blogs posted by a witty young Iraqi lady known online as "Riverbend" (Christian). Indeed, there has been no shortage of texts on the Iraq War. So much so, in fact, that one may initially question the purpose of continued attention to the subject. Is there truly more to be said? Is there a meaningful place for more literature on the Iraq War?

Two primary purposes come to light for the continued writing of Iraq War literature: the saturation of the literature is not nearly as complete as it initially seems, and the sobering message of that literature remains to be received. In terms of the first, while literally thousands of texts have been written on the subject, there still remains a shortage of certain types of writings. Of the more than 2,200 books published with "Iraq War" as a subject, the vast majority—over two thousand—are classified as nonfiction accounts. Of the remaining 183 publications,⁽²⁾ many fall into the category of the Stephen King novel mentioned earlier—the plotline centers on a character returning from the war theater rather than one currently in that setting. Most of these authors, while having access to the swarming information on the war, have not experienced it personally. In short, a paucity of the Iraq War literature is from the men and women who have served there, and of these works, the vast majority falls into the category of memoir: relatively few veterans have published creative works on the Iraq War. While it may be logical that it is the truth of veterans' accounts that gives their writings weight, the unique abilities of fiction and poetry to convey the heart of a writer's message should by no means be overlooked.

This theme is explored at length in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. This book is officially classified as fiction (the subtitle actually reads "A Work of Fiction"), but much of it stems from O'Brien's own experiences as an infantryman in the Vietnam War. The blurring of fact and fiction, O'Brien finds, is far more apt to tell the *truth* of a war story. This theme he addresses directly in the famous chapter "How to Tell a War Story." Here, O'Brien weaves his way in and out of a

narrative about a soldier called Rat writing a letter to the sister of a recently killed comrade. Throughout the chapter, O'Brien adds details, changes previous ones, chases other narratives to illustrate a point, and in the end, concludes that "a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another may not happen and be truer than the truth" (83). What makes an account true, O'Brien asserts, is not the physical reality of a narrative—whether the events actually happened or not—what matters is the visceral reaction of the audience to a revelation about life and humanity that a mere re-telling of events could not produce (83-85). Or, in O'Brien's words, "In the end, a true war story is never about war" (85). O'Brien's unique perspective, crafted over years of honing his own war stories, illustrates the need for Iraq literature to bear the stamp not only of soldiers' memoirs but also soldiers' poems, soldiers' stories, soldiers' carefully remembered and carefully fabricated reflections on the human experience.

Yet the literature of the Iraq War has been missing precisely that kind of narrative. Michael David Lukas states the case rather bluntly, "After nearly a decade of US soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems reasonable to ask: where is the literature of our current conflicts?" He mentions Brian Turner's poetry as an exception, and acknowledges several of the memoirs in print, but quickly asserts, "But aside from these and a smattering of shorter works, the literature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has yet to emerge." Lukas does see hope, however, in the number of Iraq War veterans now enrolled in MFA programs and in veterans-specific writing projects springing up at VA centers, military bases, and humanities councils across the country. Maybe Iraq War literature, Lukas concludes, is merely in the process of emerging. But as it now stands, although thousands of publications on the war are currently in print, there is a need for more writing, and especially creative writing, from veterans of Iraq.

All this is not to say that non-veterans and non-combatants are barred from sharing in the creation of war literature: there doubtless is the ability of non-warriors to participate imaginatively in the war experience and the unique revelations it entails. Not all war literature need be written by veterans, *per se*, but there is, nonetheless, a certain authenticity and immediacy that personal experience lends to a war writer's message, "a sense of legitimacy and gravitas," in Lukas's words. This is strikingly evident in Michael Broek's review of Brian Turner's war poetry: Broek begins his consideration of the veteran's poems with an immediate apology for an inability to grasp the full range of the work's import: "It might be somewhat embarrassing to suggest that I could write about Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise* (Alice James,

2010), not being a veteran myself” (Broek 35). Broek’s needless apology illustrates a widespread belief that personal experience in war lends some innate ability to grasp existence in deeper terms, some profound sense of “the horror and mysteries” (Broek 35) contained in war’s trauma. This belief lends itself to a more reverent reception of works by war veterans than by those who witness war from a distant or entirely imagined standpoint. For whatever reason, a certain authority of voice is attributed to a veteran’s accounts: a unique stage and unique responsibility for the author.

In addition to the general authenticity credited to a veteran’s war story, critics have also worried over an apparent need for the public’s greater understanding of the human cost of the war. The widely anthologized and awarded international poet Mong Lan, for example, insists that the American public still fails to grasp the staggering tragedy the war has brought on the Iraqi people: “in spite of television, embedded reporters, and the internet, most Americans are today equally unaware of the horrors that the American invasion has inflicted on millions of Iraqis. . . . With America today in Iraq, there is no need to consider others, no need to contemplate the possibility that they too have lives and hopes. That they too feel pain, bleed, and die” (99). In fact, Lan is so stirred by the power of fiction to change a person’s social perspective that she advocates the mailing of war literature (in particular, Twain’s “The War Prayer”) to heads of state and influential politicians (100). The leaders, she claims, have yet to learn the truths creative writers are expressing in their works of war. It doesn’t tax the imagination to see this statement apply to the general populace as well.

Lan, however, is certainly not the only critic concerned for the plight of the Iraqis or the possibility that fiction can create awareness and even cause action on this front. Caryl Christian, in a lengthy article for the *New York Review of Books*, launches into a detailed examination not only of the writing merits of four Iraqi-authored publications on life during the American occupation but also a detailed examination of the difficulties many Iraqis endured at that time. For this article, Christian went so far as to personally visit Baghdad during the violent uprisings of 2006 in order to interview residents as to their quality of life, security, and attitudes toward the American occupation. The resulting article sheds much light on the imposing health and safety threats faced by Iraqi citizens in everyday life: finding gas for cooking, paying protection money to violent mobs, and confronting paranoia about night raids from US soldiers, to name a few. These are grim realities ignored by most US media discussions of the war.

While it is true that the sectarian violence of 2006 has been largely calmed, that U.S. soldiers have nearly completely exited Iraq, and that the government is stable enough to put on a lavish display for the Arab League meeting, the prosperity of Iraq is anything but decided. During that Arab League meeting, for example, VIPs saw a half-billion dollar renovation of a portion of the capitol, but what they were not shown were a city's routines ground to a halt, all business and personal travel forbidden, checkpoints brimming with armed guards radiating out from the conference and city center, and the capitol's inhabitants shut up in their homes for days on end until the conference closed (al-Salhy). Such drastic security measures hardly speak of a return to normalcy. Likewise, away from Baghdad the violence and threats of violence continue to persist. Suadad al-Salhy reports that Mosul—Iraq's third-largest city—today is divided by persisting sectarian violence and ruled by strong-armed tribal gangs. Intelligence reports that militias here extort up to seven million dollars per month in protection money from local residents, businessmen, and even politicians. Indeed, there is much to be done in Mosul, in Baghdad, and in all of Iraq. Book reviews, news articles, and critical essays are an impetus to creating awareness of the problem. However, all agree that the American public, despite access to all such information, remains largely ignorant of the continuing fear, devastation, and plight of millions of Iraqis. If any reason at all need be given for the writing of war literature—especially from veterans—a simple remembrance of the ongoing struggle for deep-seated freedom for the Iraqi people should suffice. Literature that makes readers face the Iraqi side of the conflict is as needed as ever.

All this is to say that although literally thousands of texts are available on the Iraq War, a genuine need for continued writing does exist. One of the great paradoxes of this glut of information is that it still fails to connect meaningfully with much of the public. If accounts by veterans do indeed garner special attention, and if creative writing does indeed carry a potential for expressing truth that memoir alone falls short of, then the current scarcity of veterans' stories and poems is a void remaining to be filled.

However, even given the need for continued writing on the subject, the purpose of the writing has been a point of contention. Michael Broek, mentioned above in his review of Turner's war poetry, is of the opinion that war literature should pursue a political course. In fact, he goes as far as to regard Turner's *Here, Bullet*, the much-acclaimed collection proceeding from Turner's tour of duty as an infantry team leader in 2004-2005, as "highly problematic" (35), due to its "proximity in space and time" to the yet-unfolding events of the war, and due to its authorship. That is, Broek discounts much of the message of Turner's poetry on the

grounds that it was written by a man who was not drafted into the military, but who enlisted voluntarily—albeit before September 11 or the invasion of Iraq. Such voluntary participation in the armed conflict, Broek implies, discredits any voice of compassion or understanding in the poet: “the nature of the ‘truth’ of book’s such as Turner’s should be interrogated,” he says, especially “given the false ‘intelligence’ used to justified its [the Iraq War’s] launch” (35). Or, more bluntly, he writes, “If one can avoid a great tragedy and chooses not to, then to what degree is our empathy curtailed? Do we trust the poet?” (36). To bolster his cause, Broek quotes statements from such imminent voices as Li-Young Lee and Philip Levine—the former saying, “The way I understand poetry, all poems are anti-war poems, as the underlying order of a poem, regardless of its subject, proposes universal harmony,” and the latter, “It’s almost impossible not to write a poem that is political if you are a person who loves” (qtd in Broek 36). Even though Turner’s *Here, Bullet* is widely regarded for its multiculturalism, its respect for Arabic poetic tradition, its inclusion of Iraqi characters and voices (Peebles 132-133, Najmi 56-57), Broek apparently interprets these quotations to mean that war poetry, and in particular, Iraq War poetry, must have a definite political angle. He goes on to celebrate Turner’s second collection, *Phantom Noise*, “because it hews more closely to what Lee and Levine establish as the anti-war, political poem—the poem concerned with underlying harmony, the poem concerned with love” (36). While Broek does allow himself leeway in his definition of “political poem,” he nonetheless makes clear his conception that war literature should have a definite political angle, even if that angle is as vague as harmony and love.

War literature as political commentary represents one extreme on the spectrum of possible reactions. At the opposite end, others view war literature merely from an aesthetic or voyeuristic perspective, disregarding its unique opportunity to speak of life and tragedy. Although such a superficial reaction is possible in any genre, two in particular stand out. The first involves a recent spike in the number of Broadway plays on the war, each employing remarkably new approaches to audience involvement. In an article appearing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2008, culture reporter Alexandra Alter found that while a number of new plays based on the Iraq War had recently debuted, most were foundering. The problem, according to one producer, was that the audience had been inundated with numerous productions already. Coupled with the recent economic crisis, fewer visitors were frequenting the theater, and most of those were seeking something other than heavy doses of tough reality. Allan Buchman, director of a company known as Culture Project,

put it this way: “If you watch your computer screen and the Dow drops 250 points, do you really want to go out to a play and watch some more bad news?” (Alter).

Nevertheless, Alter found that some plays, contrary to the prevailing trend, were in fact earning money. The difference in these plays was that most were highly experimental in form, each offering something new in the way of its presentation and its message. For example, *Surrender*, a play co-authored by an Iraq War veteran, actually involves the audience as actors, fitting them out in fatigues, giving them a crash course in urban combat, and allowing them to go on patrol through the theater, encountering the actors, who play a variety of roles, such as Iraqis in their homes and on the streets. The effect “plunges theatergoers into the chaos, adrenaline, dread, and camaraderie of modern urban warfare” (Alter). In other words, it is a highly sensationalized, voyeuristic (and apparently profitable) experience focusing on the excitement and adrenaline of combat. Doubtless, writers and producers were aiming for something more than merely a civilian-safe shoot-em-up. In fact, Alter’s article quotes the producer describing the play’s purpose as “addressing the huge cultural gap between the military and the non-military.” But the veracity of such a claim is called into question when we read his take on the target audience: “He hopes to attract not just experimental-theater enthusiasts, but war veterans and adrenaline junkies eager to experience the rush of combat.” Given this, the underlying treatment of war in this type of literature seems not to raise awareness of the human situation, nor even to fulfill the stated purpose of bridging the gap between soldier and civilian, but rather to serve as an aesthetically experimental piece exploiting war’s violence to give audiences an adrenaline-juiced introduction to the dangers of combat.

Perhaps such a play is not so different from a second type of voyeuristic literature based on the Iraq War: the video game. Purists may cringe to hear video games included in the canon of accepted genres of literature, but with the increasingly complex nature of the roles and narratives involved in the storylines, it is increasingly feasible to view contemporary video games as interactive literature (Peebles 17-20). While video games have often involved some form of violence—in varying degrees of cartoonish or realistic—modern games involve players in more life-like situations and graphics than ever before. Rather than compete as obviously fictitious characters against programmed opponents and obstacles, players of *Modern Warfare*, *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, and other series assume roles of realistic characters, complete with true-to-life uniforms, weapons, and equipment to engage in battle situations designed to mirror exactly those faced by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Likewise, the gameplay is more often than

not against other humans competing either in person or online. While there have been debates among veterans as to just how realistic the various games actually are, any discrepancies certainly aren't for a lack of trying—game makers readily employ special operations soldiers as consultants on how to make the action sequences more realistic (Bendetti). The result is apparently a close enough approximation to actual combat experience that such games have been alternately prohibited for soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or used therapeutically to relieve such stress (Bendetti). In either case, the point more germane to this discussion is that video games as war literature seek to exploit the war experience as a means to re-creating a voyeuristic, entertaining experience based on the action sequences of battle—hyper-realistic, interactive depictions of war which serve not to provoke deep-seated musings on its troubling themes but rather to immerse audiences in the intense sensations of the battlefield.

It is no secret that many soldiers are drawn to enlist expressly because of movies and video games sensationalizing the excitement of combat. However, reading—or for that matter, writing—solely for aesthetic or for voyeuristic participation in the drama of combat falls far below war literature's potential as a unique voice of human existence: attention to the immediacy of the message is required, is expected, of a text detailing such widespread and intense trauma. As author Stacey Peebles bluntly phrases it, "Tuning everything out for the sake of entertainment doesn't do much good for anyone" (174). Or to remember O'Brien's admonition: Effective war stories must express a truth of our existence that is not necessarily about war at all. Writing, or reading, merely for shock value, for excitement, for action-packed adrenaline rushes is—just like writing merely for political purposes—an unsatisfactory aim for war literature.

Fitting, then, between the poles of political commentary and pure aesthetic appeal, other critical voices have found a middle ground for viewing Iraq War literature. One such view of the literature is to read it in terms of a forum for social change. This view does, admittedly, run a parallel course to that of explicitly political poetry. For example, the view espoused by poet Mong Lan above is a fitting illustration. Looking directly at Twain's short story "The War Prayer," Lan traces a long history of America celebrating its warriors and failing to see the human tragedy that necessarily results from their victories. In the Vietnam War, she notes such texts are necessary for awakening society to war's horrors. However, Lan does not stop there. As a corollary to this social function, she moves directly to the political spectrum, claiming "The War Prayer" should be sent to the White House and political leaders worldwide in order to dramatically illustrate, to those

in positions of political authority, the cost of their militaristic decisions. While stopping a hair short of employing the literature to promote one political agenda over another, Lan nevertheless explicitly portrays war literature as a function of definite social change—one to be implemented by political means in the case of Iraq.

Other writers have employed a similar middle-ground response to war literature, but with a subtly effective twist: by interpreting the text not as a means for effecting aggregate change in social behaviors, but rather as an exercise in self-enlightenment. Lukas effectively articulates this view:

Literature about war allows readers to see the human face of events that have been reduced to headlines and body counts. After nearly a decade of fighting, we can forget that our country is at war on multiple fronts. Even when we remember, we are disconnected from the fear and uncertainty and strangeness of fighting a war. . . . The stories and poems of our veterans are an essential piece of understanding who we are, as a country at war and as the citizens in whose name the wars are waged.

For Lukas, veterans' writing—in particular creative writing—serves not merely for entertainment nor for political ends but rather as an “essential” ingredient to understanding ourselves, both individually and corporately. Also espousing this reception to war literature is Stacey Peebles, author of *Welcome to the Suck*, a critical analysis of the content displayed in a wide variety of Iraq War texts. Peebles refrains from commenting on politics of the war, even from hints of didactic anti-war rhetoric. Rather, her analyses remain objective, presenting the literature in a balanced manner and focusing on what such literature reveals about our society and about the individuals involved in its war. These commentaries are directed toward self-understanding for the society, but sans any calls for social change. After examining memoirs, blogs, films, poems, and documentaries, Peebles arrives at the conclusion that the most important aspect of war-story-telling is the telling itself, both for the speaker and for the audience, exhorting both to listen and to learn. In her conclusion to the book, she writes, “[War] is, as ever, a breaking point for history, politics, art, and the very ways we talk to one another. It matters, and soldiers' stories tell us why and how. Then, and now, we have to listen” (174). This idea is certainly different from that espoused by Broek, who pushed for an outright politic agenda in war poetry; or by the authors of voyeuristic video games and plays, who seek to re-create combat experience for entertainment and profit; or by Lan,

who sees war literature as working toward widespread social epiphany. Peebles' take on the genre is at once more personal and more practicable in its aims.

If war literature is most effectively employed as an exercise in self-discovery and existence-examination, it is reasonable to ask exactly what we have been discovering in the initial decade of Iraq War literature. In the past ten years, in the mountains of memoirs and the precious collections of creative texts available, what have we seen in ourselves? What themes and issues are already evident in this war's literature?

Stacey Peebles' is by far the most comprehensive work to date examining the unique themes surfacing in veterans' writing on the Iraq War. Her analysis reveals a much different society and a much different military and a much different literature than America's previous wars have seen. The themes stressed in her study of the major works produced by the war thus far have focused on four primary themes: the media and popular portrayals of war, conceptions of identity and masculinity among soldiers, reactions to and depictions of the Other, and the recovery—both physical and emotional—from the war (21). In each of these areas, Peebles notes an over-arching current of an increasing, though often frustrated, drive toward a sense of hybridity:

What is most evident in these narratives is the soldier's desire to be truly 'in between,' to break down and transcend the cultural and social categories that have traditionally defined identity. Ultimately, however, that desire is thwarted. War, and contemporary American war in particular, enforces categorization even as it forces encounters across the boundaries of medium, gender, nation, and body (2).

This desired hybridity exhibits itself in a number of ways; for example, in terms of changing media, Peebles demonstrates many soldiers' desires to be both a dutiful war hero and yet retain the freedom they've been raised with to voice reactions and complaints. Another form of hybridity Peebles notes involves conceptions of masculinity in the ranks. This may take the form of an internal conflict of a male soldier to be the traditional model of physical or social dominance as well as a more contemporary role of an understanding, intellectual, psychological voice. Additionally, gender hybridity is seen surfacing in the ever-increasing population of female soldiers—expected to perform the same roles as their male counterparts, yet nonetheless occupying a social strata well outside the masculinized majority, and subject to its gendered and sexual tensions. Intercultural hybridity is another

constant struggle: living and working in an environment of constant uncertainty in distinguishing friend from foe, frequently shifting loyalties among the Iraqi populace, and an imposed distance from meaningful interaction with the Other. And finally, a hybrid identity is a longed-for dream scarcely, if ever, attained by soldiers returning home from the war theater with physical or mental scarring. As Peebles demonstrates, at times the separation between a soldier or veteran from the mainstream is exceedingly difficult to overcome, whether in terms of physical wounds, psychological trauma, or simply a different set of norms and expectations. Whatever the case, in each of these areas, Peebles observes veterans' writing as an attempt to establish a sense of self somewhere in between traditional binaries opposites; however, this struggle often leaves the writer frustrated, perplexed, and disillusioned.

One of the most notable soldier-authors Peebles examines is the poet Brian Turner. A recipient of an MFA from the University of Oregon, Turner travelled widely before enlisting in the Army. There, he was deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999-2000, and later, to Iraq in 2003-2004. In academic circles, Turner's poetry is widely hailed as strikingly articulate, and he has received numerous awards for his work. Peebles notes an attempt at hybridity in his work through his portrayals of the Iraqi people. In fact, in contrast with other writers exhibiting xenophobic tendencies, she finds that "Turner takes in so much that he is full to bursting" (132). That is, his identification with the Iraqis he encounters is so deep-rooted that it clashes violently with his identity as a soldier and an occupier among them.

This identification with the Other is seen most obviously in Turner's propensity to borrow words and phrases of Arabic as subtitles to his poems, to frequently allude to Iraqi and Arab cultural figures and poetry, and to tag sections of his books with lines of Iraqi poetry. In all these, it becomes obvious that this is a man who has immersed himself in the culture of the Other. On a deeper level, we see in the poems' content not only respect but admiration for the Iraqi people. "In the Leupold Scope" shows Turner's speaker scanning distant rooftops of Halabjah, then pausing suddenly to notice a woman hanging laundry to dry. In sensual depictions of the colors and grace of the scene, the speaker imagines the woman "dressing the dead, clothing them / as they wait in silence . . . / welcoming them back to the dry earth / giving them dresses in tangerine and teal" (7-11). Here, the Iraqis are not enemies, and the distance between the speaker and the subject is quickly erased by the Leupold scope and the speaker's comforting imagination.

While admiration may be conveyed for an innocent non-combatant who has suffered war's wounds, it is a decidedly different case to express that same wonder for

an enemy. Yet that is exactly the case Turner sets up in “The Al Harishma Weapons Market.” Here, we see tender descriptions of Akbar, a black-market weapons dealer preparing a shipment of AK-47’s, pistols, and RPG’s for insurgents. He calmly stirs the tea he’s boiling, then carries his four-year-old to bed, whispering of the frightening gunfire outside, “It’s just the drums, a new music” (22), and the bright tracers splitting across the sky, “he retraces on the ceiling, showing the boy / how each bright star travels” (24-25). Such gentle depictions complement and contrast famous poems such as “The Hurt Locker” and the title poem “Here, Bullet,” which recount the mental anguish American soldiers face in war’s theater.

Given such examples as these, it’s no surprise Peebles singles Turner out for his identification with the Other. Such an observation is by no means unique to her account. Michael Broek, the reviewer mentioned earlier who found political grounds to suspect Turner’s poetry, nonetheless remarks that *Here, Bullet* is “a provocative study in post-colonialism and its aftermath, multi-culturalism,” adding that these poems succeed because, “they discover something about the ‘Other,’ not necessarily about the speaker” (35). Likewise, Broek finds Turner’s second collection, *Phantom Noise*, remarkable because “the poet situates himself in both worlds. . . . He earns the imprimatur of the authentic” (36). Additionally, Samina Najmi, reads Turner’s poetry with the same admiration of its multicultural tendencies. In fact, Najmi’s detailed analysis, “The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet*,” examines the poetic strategies Turner employs to “resist the white Western gaze and, thereby, the rote performances of whiteness at the nexus of racial-national difference” (57). Specifically, that resistance to the typical colonializing gaze comes through several distinctive poetic techniques employed by Turner, namely “narrative descriptions, a focus on exteriority and smallness, evocations of Iraq’s ancient history, and a reliance on the surreal.” Each of the four is a sophisticated mechanism designed to remove a reader’s gaze from the speaker and focus his or her attention on the subject, on the war, on the Other. In addition to her examination of these four traits of Turner’s poetry, Najmi also relies on interviews with the poet to make her case for *Here, Bullet*’s multiculturalism. Commenting on the variety of viewpoints employed throughout the collection, Turner says, “There are many other voices and experiences that this book doesn’t go into and it’s an incomplete book on its own. I’m trying to say that, but I’m also trying to say that there are many other voices that we need to hear. Like the Iraqi people. How often do we hear their voices?” (qtd in Najmi, 63). In this statement, Turner confirms what the critics have found in his two collections: a concerted effort at voicing the Iraqi perspective and a blending of viewpoints to do precisely that.

In these accounts—Peebles, Broek, and Najmi—we observe a variety of sources attesting the attempts of Turner to go beyond binary opposites and include the Other in a viable way. As one of the most preeminent poetic voices to emerge from the Iraq War, Turner’s stance on this hybridity and this multiplicity of viewpoints is particularly authoritative. Especially in light of the shortage of creative works yet produced on the conflict, Turner’s work stands as something of a flagship or a beacon which many other texts are likely to follow: war literature attempting a hybridity of identity, a transcending and merging of traditional binary opposites. However, as Peebles points out, this is a desire which, more often than not, proves impracticable and leaves the voice conflicted and confused, often cynical and broken. *Here, Bullet* is an example of this, as seen in its final poem, “To Sand.” Here Turner catalogs a systematic regression toward the oblivion of the sand, beginning with the implements of war and progressing to humanity,

To sand go tracers and ball ammunition.
To sand the green smoke goes.
Each finned mortar, spinning in light.
Each star cluster, bursting above.
To sand go the skeletons of war, year by year.
To sand go the reticles of the brain (lines 1-6).

Peebles explains such futility and pessimism in terms of, “the viability of boundary-crossing as a sustainable or even productive practice becomes increasingly suspect. Moments of clarity are inextricable from moments of destruction” (129). While attempts at hybridity are evident in Turner’s poetry, representative of many of the other examples of war literature to date, we nonetheless find that it is a hybridity which does not solve, a transcendence yet steeped in war’s trauma.

In any case, the value of Turner’s poetry to literature and to society lie in the fact that it is not memoir—a nonfiction recounting of factual events by the author—but poetry—a creative reflection that steps beyond a poet’s experience and renders his reflection as something of a universal truth rather than one limited to the man who lived through the events. Indeed, of “To Sand” a reader could say that little of Turner’s ostensible soldiership is seen, only the resulting impression left upon him by the experience. We don’t look at the tip of the iceberg, but what lies beneath the surface.

And the value of such literature—both from the perspective of readers and for those veterans who create it—has largely been ignored in the ten years since the US

invasion of Iraq. This is not to say that nonfiction is non-valuable, but rather that nonfiction creative works of poetry, of fiction, of drama, of experiment provide a unique glimpse at human meaning beyond the recounting of and commenting on events typically provides.

As Iraq moves past its lavish shows for the Arab League and continues to struggle with security and reconstruction, soldier-writers need to publish creative literature recounting life as seen from the war's front. We need the poems, we need the fiction, we need to see works steeped deeper in thought than mere recollection of fact, valuable as that may be. America, Iraq, the world—all need to see the conflict through a broader scope of human experience: not watching for a mere political message, not only for moments of voyeuristic excitement, but to see what such literature may reveal about ourselves, our society, and our existence.

Notes

1. This is according to a *Books in Print* search on December 29, 2012, using “Iraq war” as a subject and limiting the results to books published in the US between Jan 2003 and the current date.
2. Again, this was a *Books in Print* search performed on the same date above, this time limiting the results to fiction books for the same dates.

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