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They Call it the Hajji Mall

The first time I heard the word, *hajji*, it didn't even register. Until a few months ago, I was certain that my first encounter with the word happened in a cafeteria on an American Air Force base in the United Arab Emirates in 2007. I was wrong. I had just completed a rough draft of this essay when I accidentally stumbled upon an old email on my computer from my first deployment in 2005. Following a hunch, I searched my hard drive for the word "hajji" and then read the following line from a message that I had sent my brother from my base in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: "Left base today and bought some stuff at a market just outside our front gate. They call it the Hajji Mall." My brother has a frustratingly strong memory, and he responded to my email that same day: "Hadji was Johnny Quest's sidekick." He was right. In the *Johnny Quest* cartoon series (first aired in 1964), Hadji is a 12-year-old orphan from Calcutta. He is the adopted brother of the protagonist/hero Johnny Quest; he knows judo; he is quick to deliver whatever wisdom the adventure of the episode demands. What the creators of *Johnny Quest* ignored, and what I did not realize (despite six semesters studying Arabic in college) was that the word *hajji* is an Anglicized, phonetic representation of a very real, and very specific word in the Arabic language.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *hajji* (sometimes spelled *hadji*, *haji*, or *hogie*) is defined as "The title given to one who has made the greater pilgrimage . . . to Mecca." It is a real honorific, a real title, reserved for real pilgrims, applied to individual men as a sign of respect. For example, in Dexter Filkins' book, *The Forever War*, about the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the word only appears once, in the appropriate denotative sense, as the first name of the owner of a kebab house that

Filkins frequented in Baghdad. Presumably, the owner had completed the *hajj* to Mecca; thus, Filkins knew him as Hajji Hussein (220). This accurate use of the word is rare, however; in nearly every western account of the violent collision between the United States military and the various cultures of southwest Asia, the word is immediately misappropriated and repurposed.

The word *hajji* is ubiquitous among Americans serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. It is such a universal tag that the true power of such denigration is difficult to grasp. In my own experience, the word applies everywhere, for nearly any purpose, as long as a brown person is involved. Islam is not even a requirement. For instance, at many US installations in the Middle East, the local population has no interest in serving Americans food or unclogging American toilets. So the contracting companies ship in “Third Country Nationals” (TCN’s) to do the work, typically for low wages and for long periods of time away from their own homes and families. At my air base in the middle of the desert south of Abu Dhabi, the United States Air Force even maintains a small group of airmen whose sole duty is to follow the TCN’s around; this squadron even, for a time, had a big sign painted in front of their tent that said, “We Watch Them So You Don’t Have To.” In the UAE, miles from the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan, the *them* of *us versus them* are all described with one word: *hajji*.

My second encounter with the word occurred there, at the Al Dhafra Air Base. I had just landed after a long overnight mission in Iraq (as a pilot in a KC-10 refueling tanker). I was grumpy and dirty and so was the rest of my crew. We just wanted to get a quick breakfast, a quick shower, and go to bed. In the cafeteria, I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich from the man behind the grill (a TCN from Bangladesh) and he didn’t understand me. He gestured toward a stack of grilled hamburgers, and I said, “Fine,” and nodded. I was too tired to bother. The confusion had slowed the line behind me, and as I moved to the side to wait for my burger to be warmed up, the guy behind me mumbled, “Fucking hajji.” I didn’t immediately alert to the word or what its utterance might say about the speaker and about our presence in a Muslim country; I perked up because I thought he was talking about me. I stood there in my sweaty flight suit trying to figure out what he had just said about me and why. I turned around and looked at this slack-jawed teenager waiting for his scrambled eggs, and the connection between the pilgrimage and the epithet suddenly dawned on me. After that, I began to notice it everywhere.

Once a week, local artisans and entrepreneurs were allowed to set up tables on the basketball courts on our compound and sell us trinkets and pirated DVDs. Everyone called it the “hajji bazaar.” To get to our airplanes, we had to drive around

to the other side of the two-mile long runway and through two or three security checkpoints. You never wanted to get caught behind the “hajji hauler” (the bus that brought the TCN’s to the base). We drank bottles of “hajji water” (because they had Arabic writing on them). Insidious, *hajji* snuck into my own vernacular, and when I returned home, I tried to describe to my wife the amazing head rub that the barbers would give us for six dollars. I heard myself call it a “hajji haircut.” My wife’s face changed, and after I tried in vain to explain why we called it that, I began to think about the word in earnest.

In the winter of 2008, I was trying to takeoff from the United States Air Force base in Kazakhstan, a primarily Muslim country but one somewhat removed from 9/11, Iraq, Al Qaeda, and Afghanistan. The other pilot and I were both having some trouble understanding our clearance for takeoff through the thick accent of the local air traffic controller. After a couple of failed attempts to communicate over the radio, the other pilot breathed, “Why can’t the fucking hajji learn fucking English?” I asked him if he knew what a *hajji* really was. He said, “Yeah, that fucking guy,” pointing vaguely towards the airfield’s tower.

In print, many use the word *hajji*, and many feel an obligation to explain why. It’s almost as if each speaker or author, if they are being honest, recognizes the implications of such an act of Othering. Still, very few are willing to examine the meaning-making moment that accompanies each use of the word *hajji*. In his memoir—*Joker One* (2009)—former Marine officer Donovan Campbell writes about one of his Marines who witnesses a fight between two enemy insurgents through the scope of his sniper rifle. “Ser’ent. Ser’ent!” the man yells into the radio, “A hajji just shot another hajji in the back. He’s gonna shoot him again, Ser’ent” (148). Before Campbell even goes on to narrate the action of the story, he interrupts his text to include a long parenthetical explanation for the word *hajji*. What I find most remarkable about this piece of dialogue is not only that Campbell feels obligated to justify the pejorative use of *hajji* (though he is unwilling to more fully analyze its contextual significance); rather, I find it fascinating that he interrupts his narrative in a somewhat admirable attempt to remove some of the sting that he knows is inherent to *hajji*’s existence as an American label for any Arab, combative or otherwise. He writes,

“Hajji,” by the way, was our generic term for the Iraqis. Its formal use is as an honorific bestowed on someone who has completed the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. I’m afraid our use was more in the grand tradition of soldiers faced with a populace with whom we couldn’t communicate

and who often seemed difficult to understand, to say the least. In most instances the term wasn't meant to denigrate the Iraqis—we simply used the two-syllable “hajji” because it was easier than the three-syllable “Iraqi.” (148)

Something told Campbell that the word *hajji* needed an explanation. While I doubt his syllable-saving logic, and I take issue with the adjective “grand,” at least he recognizes its potential power and—feebly—tries to explain it away.

In Campbell's entire memoir, this one line of dialogue is the only appearance of *hajji* in a book that almost exclusively chronicles the interactions between young Marines and Iraqis. Campbell's story does not otherwise shy from any other depiction of war, and his work thoroughly demonstrates Tim O'Brien's famous line about war and obscenity: “Send guys to war,” O'Brien writes, “they come home talking dirty” (77). Despite witnessing and writing about much more evil and many more instances of indecency (verbal and physical), this is his only *mea culpa*. Why does he reluctantly admit to using such a word (“I'm afraid our use . . .”) and refrain from using it in any other dialogue if it does not denigrate? Campbell's aside speaks volumes about the word as a sign.

Actually, Campbell may be correct to insist that *hajji* doesn't denigrate the individual, at least directly or at a personal level. In many representations of the invasion of Iraq or the occupation of Afghanistan, *hajji* operates as a code between two American soldiers, a distancing between the U.S. soldier and the often-invisible enemy. War is full of silence, boredom, and long periods of waiting, and in the second episode of HBO's popular series *Generation Kill* (2008), the men fill that silence with a slight adaptation of an already-violent song by a metal group called Drowning Pool. Instead of “Let the bodies hit the floor!” the Marines tweak the lyrics to “Let the hajjis hit the floor!” Later, in the same episode, a different group of Marines riff on the song “Boyz 'n da Hood,” by rapper Eazy-E, changing the lyrics to “It's Two-One Bravo in a Humvee / I roll down my window and I start to say / it's all about killin' hajjis today / cuz the boys in the hood are always hard” (“Episode 2”). In both cases, there is no enemy to be seen or addressed.

In many ways, *hajji* parallels similar epithets from other modern wars (like *gooks*, *Japs*, *krauts*, and *Charlie*) in that each epithet ultimately serves to objectify other human beings. In his famous essay “The Rhetoric of Hitler's ‘Battle’” (1939), Kenneth Burke shows us the “testament of a man who swung a great people into his wake” with the “magic” of his rhetorical constructions of the Other before and during World War II (1). In Burke's estimation, Hitler showed the world that it is

easier to motivate a modern populace in an endeavor to kill other human beings when objects, not humans, oppose. *Hajji* conflates any brown person with all Arabs and all terrorists, leaving no room for individuals, no space for varying religions or ethnic backgrounds or any other human nuance. In novels and movies and television shows that deal directly with combat soldiers, *hajji* seems to operate—effectively—as a sign between Americans with guns who need to reimagine individual Iraqis and Afghans as faceless bodies in a massive Islamic horde. Essentialism and racism follow quickly behind. The abstractness of the term promotes, in an environment dripping with fear, the full development of abstract hate.

Significantly, perhaps, HBO joins Donovan Campbell in a decision to include an explanation for the word *hajji* in the DVD boxed set version of *Generation Kill* and on its promotional website. The marketing material—both in print and online—includes a small “glossary” of unique, sometimes funny, always specialized words and phrases that are used in the series. In the glossary, HBO defines the term “haji” denotatively: “An Iraqi or Arab or Muslim of any ethnicity, from the Arabic ‘haji,’ which is the honorific term for anyone who has made the trip to Mecca, the Hajj.” But then, the explanation tries to claim a non-derogatory intent, just as Campbell does:

Americans who use the term Haji are probably not referring to that pilgrimage but to the once popular children’s cartoon Johnny Quest in which the white boy hero’s turban-wearing sidekick was named Haji; not necessarily a pejorative term, Haji may be used as an adjective to describe anything Middle Eastern, e.g. Iraq’s customary flat bread is referred to as “Haji bread” or “Haji tortillas.”

With its origins in Islam and its misappropriation in representations of Operation Iraqi Freedom, *hajji* operates as a multipurpose sign carrier for the Orient or for the stereotypical jihadist Muslim, the same terror-laden crusader who flew airplanes into buildings in New York and Washington D.C. over ten years ago.

Hajji may seem innocuous enough when it describes flat bread, but the context of war (a holy war even) spreads from each usage to the next one, no matter where that usage occurs or how it is intended. Burke describes the same phenomena in Hitler’s “selection of an ‘international’ devil, the ‘international Jew’”: “As soon as the wavering masses find themselves confronted with too many enemies, objectivity at once steps in, and the question is raised whether actually all others are wrong and their own nation or their own movement is right” (3). Another entry

in HBO's "glossary" is "Foshizzle . . . Hajizzle," which is defined as "A goof on Snoop Dogg's hip-hop lingo to mean 'for sure' and 'haji.'" Snoop Dogg's famous phrase is "Foshizzle . . . my nizzle." Thus, one racial epithet ("nigga") is replaced with another ("haji"). *Hajji* is always pejorative, concentrating hate on a single enemy through its universality.

Hajji stands for the collective rage and fear that followed the trauma of 9/11, and every time a reader or a viewer encounters *hajji* he now has a target for that loathing and anger. Charles Peirce's concept of a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respects or capacity" is especially applicable every time *hajji* is uttered by an American soldier (228). Its "standing for" quality makes *hajji* far more complex than other epithets of other wars. In his book, *The Warrior* (1970), J. Glenn Gray posits a reasonable question of warring man's universal urge to not only objectify, but to also demonize the enemy: "The question pregnant with possibility is: Can we not expect under modern conditions of communication and transmission of knowledge that realist attitudes toward potential enemy nations will increase and fewer individuals will be able to generate beast and devil images?" (166). It would appear that, in Iraq and Afghanistan at least, the answer is a resounding no.

In the National Endowment for the Arts' collection, *Operation Homecoming* (2006), *hajji* appears in only one story, "Six Weeks In" by an Army Specialist named Ross Cohen. In the biographical blurb that precedes the short story, the editors include the following explanatory note: "Since Taliban and Al Qaeda troops did not wear uniforms and appeared, to most U.S. personnel, indistinguishable from innocent civilians, American forces had to approach almost every stranger, or 'hajji' as they referred to them, as a potential threat" (85). Of the three "definitions" discussed in this essay, this short explanation somehow feels the most appropriate. At a minimum, it reflects the word's problematic heritage, and it feels more honest than Campbell's and certainly more so than HBO's. It doesn't pretend that the traditional Arabic meaning even remotely remains when U.S. personnel utter the word *hajji*; rather, it admits that something else is at work when *hajji* is applied to an entire population, civilian and enemy alike, by the hegemonic voices in war and in stories about war.

In the story "Six Weeks In," that complexity is immediately apparent. Here, the dictionary definition is completely gone, and what remains is a monster of considerable proportions. A new arrival to Afghanistan, the narrator and his buddy are tasked to watch a couple of young Afghani boys who were arrested that morning and brought to the U.S. base as prisoners of war. Both Americans

are excited to get their first glimpses of the enemy, and once the pair of soldiers is alone with the pair of “prisoners” they begin taunting: “What the fuck, hajji? Why you tryin’ to kill Americans?” and “HEY FUCKIN’ HAJJI WE’RE FUCKIN’ TALKIN’ TO YOU!” (88). One of the Afghani boys begins to cry, and the pair of Americans calm down and eventually offer water, then silence. Later, the narrator finds out that the boys were just playing with matches in an open field, and that the other Americans arrested the boys out of fear only. His entire squad knows the two boys are not Al Qaeda or Taliban. But they are *hajjis* still, despite their innocence, and for that alone they are arrested and held; “Stupid fucking hajjis shouldn’t have been lighting fires,” the narrator’s buddy explains, “What are we supposed to do?” (91).

In her article, “Harm’s Way: Language and the Contemporary Arts of War,” Mary Louise Pratt analyzes language as an actual weapon of war in Afghanistan. She writes about a unit of U.S. Marines who ride into an Afghan village in their armored Humvees, with loudspeakers blaring rock and roll music in an intentional affront to the local ban on music. Their goal is to so offend with the loud music that it will draw the hidden Taliban into a fight. Pratt writes, “The act of war here is the purposeful manipulation of the enemy’s linguistic and symbolic codes in order to do the enemy harm, which is the purpose or currency of war making” (1518). *Hajji* works in much the same way, especially among non-combat units in non-combat locations.

To be sure, *hajji* has the potential to offend every time it is used, and in the short story by Cohen, *hajji* is used in an attempt to verbally wound the Other, even if the Other is not aware of the attempt. It is, however, a performance between the two soldiers only. Though the younger boy is indeed wounded enough that he begins to cry, we can safely presume that he is scared, not by the words coming out of the soldiers’ mouths, but by the fact that he is handcuffed by angry white men with guns. Pratt asks a valid question of racial epithets and their potential to harm in war: “Do words,” she writes, “when intended to wound, have an inalienable power to do so, or do addressees have the power simply to deflect them and refuse to be wounded?” (1522). The moment that the two young Americans are put on guard duty over the two boys, there is created, in Saussurean terms, an “intersection of two or more differential chains of structured differences” (Godzich 440). The meaning-making moment only exists for the Americans soldiers though; distance and difference render *hajji* ultimately powerless to injure. After all, in the story, the Afghani boys speak Pashtu. Even if they are practicing Muslims, the word *hajji* is still meaningless noise. *Hajji* does not assert any level of truth; it does, however,

embody an experience of meaningfulness between the addresser and the addressee, and neither one in this case is the Other. It is a performance full of embedded meaning for the American soldiers and the reading public.

The question, then, remains: How should the writer or the artist treat *hajji*? Should there always be a footnote or a definition? What should that definition say? Should the writer follow the lead of professional journalists like Dexter Filkin and Sebastian Junger (*War*, 2010) who excise the term almost completely from their accounts of war?

In Kevin Powers' novel, *The Yellow Birds* (2012), *hajji* appears eleven times. The first time is the most powerful, when a scared and tired squadron of soldiers prepares for an impending firefight. One of the American soldiers hopes the enemy won't fight back when his small group of men goes on the offensive. As he puts it, ". . . hopefully they'll be too scared to shoot before . . . before we fucking kill the hajji fucks" (17). *Hajji* makes seventeen appearances in the novel *FOBBIT* (2012), by David Abrams. After an embedded journalist captures a particularly exciting firefight on his camera, a public affairs officer prepares one of the more heroic soldiers for an upcoming televised interview. "We'd prefer you avoided the term *hajji*. Try *terrorist* instead," he says. The young soldier responds, "What about bloodthirsty, heartless ragheads? Couldn't I say that?" (209). Fiction somehow seems best equipped to convey the complexities of the word's use and misuse. Is that enough?

Ultimately, the various uses of *hajji* in the service of the United States' war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (in whatever genre it appears) illuminate the massive contradiction of modern warfare: society asks the military member to kill an enemy while simultaneously maintaining a human view of that same enemy. Some psychologists and sociologists even suggest that it is easier cope with the depravity and death of war if the enemy is regarded as undeserving of empathy. In his book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1995), Dave Grossman suggests that the depersonalization of stereotypes and slurs are, in part, a healthy coping skill for those experiencing the psychological shock of war (159). The intention to harm remains, however, whenever and however we utter *hajji*. Regardless the context, very few explanations seem capable of assuaging concerns in a society that purports to avoid violence, that claims to value freedom, that attempts to defend human rights.

Henry David Thoreau wrote over 150 years ago that "Familiarity breeds contempt" (649). The contempt inherent in the sign-carrier *hajji* reveals that the United States has created yet again what J. Glen Gray calls "the abiding curse of

the military profession” (148). Our enduring wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created professional soldiers caught in a world of entangled meaningfulness. Of Adolph Hitler and his book, *Mein Kampf*, Kenneth Burke writes, “. . . let us try also to discover what kind of ‘medicine’ this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (1).

Last year, an Iraq war veteran in Virginia was denied a personalized license plate that read, “ICUHAI.” He argued that the phrase was just an expression of respect intended only to convey the brotherhood he felt for the people he knew in Iraq. Six years earlier, however, the same man was denied a plate that tells an entirely different story. Had he been allowed, his license plate would have read “HAJIKLR” (Daugherty). Difficult though it may be for a society at war, the task seems urgent—now more than ever—to expect our citizenry to maintain a positive view of a humane enemy, to value humility in the face of death, to avoid the wholesale Othering of the enemy in order to kill him.

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