

Picturing the Postmodern Combatant Poetic Mind: Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*

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Abstract: This study investigates the theme of battlefield consciousness in relation to an American postmodern military. Taking Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* as a case study, the paper argues that Turner casts revealing lights on the modalities of the combatant poetic consciousness. Four modalities are investigated: discrediting metanarratives (in the Lyotardian sense of the term); engaging the imperatives of the bio-neurological; conjuring up historioscopic perspectives; and centralizing otherness. Sustaining a multifaceted critique, the socio-cultural role of the combatant-poet is to subvert the media's ennobling myth of cyberwarriors and to gauge these myths against the banal realities of an imperialist war. In short, the poetic voice in *Here, Bullet*, though an American combatant, is, intellectually, at war with the American postmodern military.

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In *Here, Bullet*, Brian Turner, as poet-soldier, articulates the emotional fluctuations of the combatant poetic self in a postmodern military.¹ Published in 2005, but mostly written during his 2003 service with the USA army in Iraq, the poetic voice, like the compound eye of his binocular, offers dual moving, always symmetrically aligned perspectives that capture the modalities of his battlefield consciousness. Turner's poems are a charged site of a

biaxial, Janus-faced ethos, insofar as they promote both disciplined observations as well as critique of war's devastating consequences.² Turner recounts not only that which pertains to the self, but also that which pertains to the other.³ The poems in *Here, Bullet* can be read as repudiation of the pragmatic rationalism of the military as well as a harness to his own oblivion, which is often a human mechanism to cope with the horrors of troubling experiences. On this point, Turner, in an interview, recounts: "It's difficult to fully remember my mind-set in terms of why I was writing, but I do remember thinking I'd forget the order of events, the particulars, the details. It felt important to remember the things that were happening around me, even if I might have struggled at the time to articulate exactly why I felt that way" (*Interview* 63).

2 As Mara Naaman cogently puts it, Turner "struggles with the impossible act of declaring oneself an American soldier while also trying to understand the people he has been sent to occupy, engage, and, in many cases, kill. There is a tension throughout his poems where the mindset of the soldier is at odds with the sensibility of the poet" (366).

3 In an informative study, Samina Najmi explicates some of the poetic strategies through which the speaker "minimize[s]" his "white military subjectivity" (60).

1 Because the poems are explicitly autobiographical, throughout this study, I will refer to the speaker in the singular and as a male, American, combatant poetic self.

A close reading makes evident that Turner's poems dwell on the questions of fate, otherness, climactic ends, and the apt ways to assemble evidence and make sense of gruesome realities. However, this study maintains that, taken together, the poems function as signposts in the depiction of the intricacies of the postmodern poetic battlefield consciousness. Moreover, the study posits that the tapestry of experiences that Turner weaves from one locale/setting to another—Bagdad, Najaf, Kirkuk, Halabjah, Balad—gravitates towards a central question which the combatant consciousness poses to itself: can the postmodern combatant self fit into the traditional universal image of the human? The purpose of this study is to open up select poems from *Here, Bullet* to critical inquiry and analyze in them specific modalities of the postmodern combatant poetic consciousness. In addition, the study investigates the poems' ethical-cultural implications. Because of its holistic nature, this study illuminates in broad-brush strokes the bent of the postmodern combatant poetic self; neither it engages in a thorough textual explication of each quoted poem nor it engages in comparisons with non-literary or literary works on the 2003 Iraq War.⁴ I will first explicate certain contextual preliminaries and, then, address the study's thematic concern.

According to Charles Moskos, John Williams, and David Segal, the postmodern military has salient "organizational" traits,⁵ notably: "the diminution of differences within the armed services based on branch of service, rank, and combat versus support roles" (2); "the change in military purpose from fighting wars to missions that would not be considered military in the traditional sense" (2); and

"the increasing interpenetrability of civilian and military spheres, both structurally and culturally"(2). This last trait of the "permeability between civil and military structures" has led to "the erosion of martial values (which traditionally have been seen as masculine)" (6). A major aspect of the postmodern military is the "integration of computer-age technologies into weapon systems and military command and control networks" (5). The nature of this technology has led to the "lessening of the distinctions between warrior and non-warrior" (5); it has also blurred the idea of front lines. The postmodern projects the idea of an objective rational truth as obsolete and discordant with the realities of a digitized world. Not only it denies the relevance of truth but it also negates the necessity of fixed rules. The intricacies of digitalization, cultural myths, simulations, and virtual images shifting with an ever-enlarging conditionality lead, as Keith Dickson postulates, to the redefinition of war as a "spectacle" (Par. 11). As such, Dickson convincingly argues that irregular "postmodern war has no pre-set rules or recognized code of conduct . . . In fact, rules . . . can be created to fit the moment and, depending on circumstance, rules can be recreated, discarded, or rejected" (Par. 11). The convergence of the postmodern aspects, postulated by Dickson and Moskos, Williams, and Segal results in an auxiliary redefinition—the heroism that propagandist and official discourses accord to the combatant loses its grounding in actual experiences and combatants often submit themselves to bare, mundane, self-perceptions. A paradox comes to the fore—despite the superiority of their high-tech warfare machinery, combatants, as Lukasz Kamienski puts it, are "[p]ostmodern Ajaxes" (4) who battle trauma and suicidal inclinations and are unable "to readapt to the society to which they return" (5).

Although the nature of the postmodern military is the primary context for the poems, to investigate the capacious purchase of Turner's *Here, Bullet*, it is important to sketch a second major context—the poems' endeavor to develop an alternative anti-mainstream media perspective on war. As several writers have demonstrated, televisual media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War abounded with the disturbing entanglement of false and staged events.⁶

4 For an informative review article on the 2003 Iraq war in art, literature, and film, see Roger Luckhurst.

5 In terms of the periodization of the development of the military, Charles C. Moskos, John A. Williams, and David Segal argue that the modern military that emerged in the nineteenth century was closely linked with the rise of the nation state (1). After World War II, the military enters a second stage: "the Late Modern" (1) which is coterminous with the Cold War era; this stage extends until the early 1990s. Two characteristics mark this second stage: "mass-conscripted armies," and "an accentuation of military professionalism in the officer class" (1-2). Moskos, Williams, and Segal call the contemporary stage "the Postmodern," and it coincides with the fall of communism, the end of the Cold War, and the demise of the Soviet Union. A key factor in the shaping of this stage is "[w]hile the military . . . continues to emphasize national patriotism, the globalization of finance, trade, communication, and other vital human activities steadily erodes much of the traditional basis of national sovereignty" (2).

6 For illuminating analyses of this issue, see, for example, *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War: the Global Media Debate*, edited by Alexander Nikolaev and Ernest Hakanen; *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us* by David Dudge.

A salient media strategy was “embedding” reporters with the US military units; the result was abrogating unbiased reporting and **disseminating a one-sided picture of the war** (Fuchs 197). These media coverage were daily imbibed by gullible viewers as unquestionable truths, genuine facts, and reliable evidence of the American ability to balance interests while adhering to a strong moral code. Media coverage operated under two major imperatives: the devaluation of otherness—Iraq was nothing but the dictatorial Other of progressive democratic America—and the containment of the war’s grotesque and inhuman aspects by eclipsing starkly bleak photojournalism of the devastated Iraqi towns and civilians.⁷ Turner pits his high fidelity images against the depravity of the falsifying media images. On the topic of war coverage in the digital era Nicholas Mirzoeff sarcastically remarks that: “[w]hat was in retrospect remarkable about this mass of material was the lack of any truly memorable images. For all the constant circulation of images [on the war on Iraq], there was still nothing to see” (66). To downplay the harsh palpable reality of war’s devastation on Iraq and to construct the intrinsic righteousness of the American army, in the media images, the display of Iraqi geographical places became washed out; by contrast, the media stirred the imagination of its viewers by focusing on the American “cyberwarriors”—the remarkable spectacle of smart bombs and “strategic strikes” which became the celebrated emblem of the post-cold war face of an unassailable American military. Televised images did not project these bombs and “precision attacks” as technologies of brutalities. On the contrary, the thrust of the media images was an emphasis on the fascinating conjunction of technology and combatant skill. Thus, one can assume that the screen was to the pro-war viewers an exotic site of the scientific genius of the American nation which would purge a third-world country from its evil weapons of mass destruction. To recapitulate, we can read Turner’s war poems as inversion of the spectra disseminated by the American mainstream media. Unlike the media, the poems do not perceive the postmodern US military as a force with a moral agenda. Articulating the voice of an infantry combatant, *Here, Bullet* takes into account a wide range of material often ignored by the American conservative media. Before I turn to

the analysis of the major traits of the combatant poetic consciousness, an overview of *Here, Bullet* is instructive.

The poems are highly referential and they deal overarchingly with death as a looming force and the tenacious urge to continue living. While the speaker’s poetic discourse shapes itself mostly around Iraqi cultural spaces, which are centralized and declared contingent and alien, occasionally American cultural spaces are nostalgically conjured up. Moving fluidly between the experiential (in the material sense of the word) and the imaginary, which is often, triggered by mental reactions to bodily pain, the combatant poetic mind embraces all that is genuinely human; it gazes at finite particulars that re-read and re-interpret previous flawed media perspectives. Moreover, it perceives existence as a field of play that comprises the beautiful and the grotesque, the quotidian and the surreal. Accordingly, perception is wrapped up in the trajectories of opposites; only within these trajectories truth lays. Consequently, the speaker’s cognitive framework is bifurcated. Generally speaking, *Here, Bullet* pivots on two differing logics: that of the biological/scientific and that of the social. In addition, the poems depict two vectors of experience: the first vector harbors a surrealist bend, which denotes an altered state of consciousness (for example, poems about the mental effects of malaria pills); the second vector captures stark realities by sensory, non-analytical perspectives. In these poems, often preceded by quotes from Arabic heritage texts, the indigenous ancient culture as well as the human natives are submerged in a universalistic/collective civilizational ethos—the muezzin’s call for prayers, primordial date palm trees, women serving chai, alluring Arabic words and phrases—all of which, as luminous, concrete, and active cultural forms, reflect the grace of Iraq’s culture. The merge of the two logics and vectors makes the poems semantically capacious. Engaging in neither a sweeping nihilism nor a declamatory left-leaning ideological critique, the poetic voice looks instead for the truth about the substrates and sentiments of the combatant poetic mind. In the analysis that will follow, I will investigate four modalities of the combatant poetic consciousness: discrediting metanarratives (in the Lyotardian sense of the term); engaging the imperatives of the bio-neurological; conjuring up what I call historioscopic perspectives; and centralizing otherness.

At the heart of *Here, Bullet*’s tangible description

⁷ For a succinct exposition of the televisual strategies of the American media coverage of the war on Iraq, see Christian Fuchs.

of the complex militarized reality surrounding the poetic self is the rejection of what Jean-François Lyotard calls “metanarratives” (xxiv) or “grand narratives” (xxiii).⁸ A Grand narrative, as Lyotard argues, tends toward totalizing conceptualizations, attempting to cast all matters and motives in one privileged perspective as if only through it the “legitimation of knowledge” (37) is effected. Grand narratives, as Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* suggests, are dangerous because they not only constrain critique but also mislead and falsify.⁹ Applying the Lyotardian term, we can say that contemporary American politico-military metanarratives persistently promote the image of America as a superpower that cultivates other nations and cultures into democracy. In the 2003 Iraq War, the rhetoric of the Bush Administration pivoted on picturing the US Army as a benevolent western force saving Iraq (and the world) from its evil of weapons of mass destruction, a country that will rise only if it is willing to endorse the American version of civil liberties. The combatant poetic self in *Here, Bullet* has a double task: while it physically combats the (external) Bathist army and adverse armed groups, it strips, intellectually, the internalized and over-mediatized metanarratives of their substantive foundation. Consequently, in *Here, Bullet*, neither the mission of spreading democracy nor the emancipation of a multi-ethnic nation from its dictatorial government are given credibility; the reader discerns that a sense of futility ranges over many poems. A reading of “Hwy 1” is instructive.

While “Hwy 1” refers to a specific spatiality that

marks the threshold of the American military mission, it does not indicate that it harbors ideals or futural success. With no excitement, the speaker describes the initial zone from which battle consciousness will flow and usher the combatant self, ironically, into a corrosive angst. Just as this highway is the genesis of battles, it is also the genesis of a pathology signified by an American sergeant’s wanton shooting of an innocent crane which “is amazed that death has found it / here, at 7 A.M. on such a beautiful morning” (21-23). One can argue that the image of the “cranes roosting atop power lines” (19) in “enormous bowl-shaped nest of sticks and twigs” (20) is symbolic and it brings forward the image of the world of the Iraqis prior to the war, a world which, despite its problems (i.e., bereft of trees and replete with power lines) was, nevertheless, intact, independent, and beyond tentativeness.

If at the beginning of the mission, before the commencement of actual combat, Iraq, as an ancient alluring place, easily made sense and appeared beautiful—“This is spice road of old, the caravan trail / of camel dust and heat, where Egyptian limes / and sultani lemons swayed in crates” (“Hwy 1” 7-9)—in “The Hurt Locker” the speaker is flabbergasted by the actual sense of Iraq as a war zone. The title denotes the beleaguerment of self in an inescapable place. About the semantic registers of the titular phrase, Stacey Peebles writes that it “refers to a place of pain, the internal or external experience of suffering that can’t be negated by adrenaline rush of combat” (22). The phrase, moreover, denotes “a scalding experience” and combatants “often use the idiom “to refer to a way of coping with the chaos and confusions of war” (22). The poem’s structure is determined by a parallelism which the repetition of the phrase “Believe it” enacts: “Believe it when a twelve-year-old / rolls a grenade into the room. / . . . Believe it when four men / step from a taxicab in Mosul / and shower the street in brass / and fire” (8-9, 12-14). The imagery in the poem points to the difficulty of creating an alternative space for a reciprocating discourse that can co-exist with the image of Iraq as the ancient space of an intellectual/civilizational exchange. The oppressive qualities of the militarized space can only produce “bullets and pain” (2), and “the bled-out slumping” (3). Under the weight of pain, rational self collapses into the frenzy of “*fucks and goddamns / and Jesus Christs* of the wounded” (4-5; original italics). In “The Hurt Locker,” the speaker is writing over a

8 Among the examples of grand narratives that Lyotard gives are “the dialectics of Spirit,” “the hermeneutics of meaning,” and “the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (xxiii). On the status of grand narratives in the post-1960s era Lyotard writes: “in contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is speculative or a narrative of emancipation” (37).

9 The intricate features of Lyotard’s concept of metanarrative/grand narrative as well as his subsequent modifications of his theoretical formulations of the concept as it appears in *The Postmodern Condition* is beyond the scope this study. Suffice it to say that this study uses the term as it clusters around the valance of ideology: i.e., how it underwrites an official/institutional political discourse that levels opinions. In light of this explication, little narratives (which are linked to the postmodern) are a vehement turn away from and against the consolidating thrust of pre-1960s modern metanarratives. What binds the two is a persistent contentious relationship.

mediatized already existent discourse of American triumphalism. Although faceless, the actors of history are a “twelve-year-old” (8) throwing a grenade, a “sniper” (10), and men who fire from taxicabs. These actors have already transcended the boundaries of American might. Tinged with angst, the poem insinuates that the alleged plan of emancipation of a nation has neither validity, nor legitimacy, nor effectiveness. Put differently, “The Hurt Locker” invokes the idea of how the combatant poetic mind is cognizant that political myopia and the lack of teleology are at work in the postmodern militarized spheres. Iraq is not the various spatialities liberated from Saddam’s regime, but a formidable locker of hurt.

The effect of the “hurt locker” condition on the combatant self is dramatically articulated in the apostrophic poem “Here, Bullet.” Thematically, the poem expresses the effects of the interiorization of the demonic bullet, the most primary sign of the coercive forms of power; to quote few lines— “If a body is what you want, / then here is bone and gristle and flesh. / . . . / Here is the adrenaline rush you crave, / that inexorable flight, that insane puncture / into heat and blood” (1-2, 6-8). In a valuable study, Ann Keniston explains the relationship between the poetic technique of apostrophe and subjectivity:

More exactly, apostrophe suggests an analogy between two modes of desire. The desire to embody the other, to give the other a voice within the poem, tends to impel poems toward the periphery of lyric utterance. In this way, insofar as apostrophe attempts to unmake the lyric’s speaker’s solitude, it invites the dissolution of its speaker as an autonomous and coherent entity and the entry of elements antithetical to the lyric (10).

The “Hurt Locker” pivots on the triangulation of self, bullet/gun, and language as if, without the bullet, the combatant self is void of discourse/parole (i.e., individual utterance).¹⁰ The poem is resonant with pulsating vowels and consonants that convey how the combatant’s tongue is convulsed by an unbridled urge for becoming an avatar for the American gun: “Because here, Bullet, / here is where I complete the word you bring / hissing through the air, here is where I moan / the barrel’s cold esophagus, triggering / my tone’s explosives for the rifling I have / inside of me” (9-14). Consequently, the torrent of the soldier’s

parole is bound up with the velocity of the bullet and this velocity is nothing more than the end (in the double sense of goal and finale) of myopic military action, for no moral justifications are bound up by the murderous act of the bullet.

Furthermore, the “Hurt Locker” foregrounds how the logic of dominion travels in a circular dehumanizing way: just as the speaker controls the gun, the gun controls him and the combatant cannot dispense acts and decisions without the gun’s desire which is also his desire. As Keniston remarks makes evident, Turner’s use of apostrophe imbues the poem with a dense irony. The bullet, I maintain, may seem to affirm self and expands the parameters of its power, yet it simultaneously, undermines self’s rationality and autonomy (as a subject in his/her own right), without which grand narratives are intellectual absurdities. That the speaker perceives his own (derivative) being in the fateful cacophonous sound of his personal machine gun, that he makes the mechanical reverberations of the bullets a co-originate wellspring of meaning, undermine his/her full humanness. The poem suggests that in war there is no preferred identity for the combatant self. The speaker reviles the bullet because it can only enact a world of exclusion and the dynamics of destruction of self as well as the other. Given this perspective, the poem suggests an absolute break with media’s representations of the American soldier as the rational, self-disciplined agent who kills only in self-defense and to terminate evil. Yet, more than the fount of a destructive language and the embodiment of the combatant’s pathologies, the bullet becomes an obscene system of signification because it valorizes the illegally invaded other as absolute enemy.

In contrast with the media image of Iraqi men as savage terrorists, an image which is necessary because it functions as a backbone to the grand narrative of a justified war, the poetic voice perceives them from a distance as separate individuals with meaningful lives of their own and with, what Lyotard calls, their own “little narratives”—“*petit récit*”— (60). As an antonymic term to grand narratives, it, on the one hand, is linked to knowledge and cognition, and on the other, carries an opposite politico-cultural valence. Lyotard explains that it “remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention” (60); as a form of “postmodern knowledge” it is not “a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s

10 The poem “Here, Bullet” invites an intertextual perspective. It can be read as an inversion of Emily Dickinson’s “My Life Stood—a Loaded Gun.”

homology, but the inventor's paralysis" (xxv). In the context of this study, a little narrative is a cogent way of understanding a particular time and place which is put forth by a person who holds a peripheral position. Analysis of "The Al Harishma Weapons Market" will establish my point.

The poem is about Akbar, "black marketer or insurgent" (9), who lives in a sordid unsafe area, where "[a]t midnight, steel shutters / slide down tight. Feral cats slink / in the periphery of the streetlamp's dim cone of light" (1-4). Akbar fights the American army not because his mind is possessed by Baathist or patriotic grand narratives but because "an American death puts food on the table, / more cash than most men earn in an entire year" (10-11). This is his little narrative which is occasioned by the need to survive and feed his family; nevertheless, the poem does not discredit Akbar's little narrative. Like a postmodern subject, Akbar does not believe in absolute truths; to him all frameworks are relative. The speaker installs and then subverts the very image he constructs of Akbar. Although a black marketer, he strikes us as a father with moral dignity because his parental commitments seem unconditional. Moreover, although he has a Machiavellian spirit, he is not mindless of "his childhood friends—"those who wear the blue uniforms / which bring death, dying from barrels / he may have oiled in his own hands" (12-15). The poem signals a discontinuity between Akbar now and his former self when free from the present increasing pressures to survive a war. Then, the poem suggests, he embodied a fine humanity.

In keeping with the mode of contrast that undercuts *Here, Bullet*, Turner introduces the idea of how the combatant poetic mind reacts when unpreoccupied with metanarratives. The series of poems titled "Dreams from the Malaria Pills" expound this theme.¹¹ Although in these poems the combatant's conscious mind is liberated from the media discourse of war's metanarratives, the spatial limits of the battlefield continue to structure his sense of a perturbing situatedness. In these poems, Turner gives a surrealistic gist to the combatant's dreams; however, the dreams' striking bizarreness can be explained. To elaborate: the poem "Dreams from the Malaria Pills (Barefoot)" sets up elliptically an

equivalence between the American combatant and his fear of annihilation—his being "wheeled" (5) on "a gunnery draped in camouflaged sheets"(6)—as karma. In the dream, the combatant has just finished the recitation of esoteric phrases from a book written by the tenth-century Arab-Spanish scientist Maslamah al-Majriti. According to the book, the recitation of these phrases should bring about visions of what the somnolent subject wishes. Ironically, the incantation does not soothe the combatant's troubled mind, as if his sinful volition as a killer annuls the incantation's therapeutic magic and it, therefore, does not protect him against nightmares but, paradoxically, augments their dreadful nature: "He's coughing up shrapnel, jagged and rough, / . . . / He is questioning why blood is needed, and so, much" (1, 4). If the meaning of the presence of Ibn Khaldun in the poem is not easily decipherable, it reflects a wider relation between the combatant mind and the cultural archeology of the other. For Ibn Khaldun takes "a piece of metal" (7) from the combatant's body. The act aligns Ibn Khaldun with the world of recuperation, peace, and change: the metal shrapnel, he says, "are to be made into [presumably ornamental] daggers / precious gifts, the souvenirs of death" (8-9). Yet one could speculate that Ibn Khaldun, who provides a causal link, brings to the somnolent combatant a compelling piece of self-knowledge: "you carry the pearls of war within you, bombs / swallowed whole and saved for later" (10-11). These words carry a sarcastic valence. The subject whose conscious cannot come to terms with his military violent acts as a soldier, enters a realm where the nature of his war laid bare: when you come to carry out destruction, you destroy yourself too. Ibn Khaldun reminds him of the need for penitential acts, something metanarratives do not iterate. Nevertheless, although a punitive place, Iraq is not equated with demonic spaces. Ibn Khaldun's words emphasize, rightly, the determinative results of the combatant's battlefield acts.

Like the aforementioned poem, in "Dreams from the Malaria Pills (Turner)," the induced nightmare is also an elliptical form of self-knowledge but one, I argue, which is predicated on parody. The image of the albatross, which "fly / reconnaissance over the waves" (22-23) of the California coast, brings in a Coleridgean framework; the reader can detect sundry affinities between this poem and *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. The speakers in both poems are "disentangled / from thought" (5-6), i.e.,

11 The physical and psychiatric side effects of these wrongly dispensed pills were horrendous. A report by Mark Benjamin states that the "drug has been implicated in numerous suicides and homicides, including deaths in the U.S. military" (*The Huffington Post*, n. pag).

rational thought. Moreover, to be caught in the “kelp beds somewhere / off the California coast” (2-3) conjures up the image of the Ancient Mariner marooned in stagnant waters before the advent of the Albatross. Like in Coleridge’s poem, this poem is predicated on the binary of loss and rescue, feeling an inner disorder and seeking an inner harmony, the canny becoming uncanny (in Freud’s definition of the term)—Turner’s native California coastline is now a place for the awful images of floating “limbs / of people he has never met” and “[b]andages / soaked in blood and salt” (11-12), all of which can be read as synecdochic and metonymic images referring to the Iraqi and American victims of war. Sustaining a moral vision, both poems make recourse to religious imagery; in Turner’s poem, the image of the speaker floating, presumably with both outstretched limbs, propels the reader to conceive him as a crucified subject. While in Coleridge’s poem the ship drops below the “kirk”, a sign that the Mariner is also dropping below a moral order, in Turner’s poem it is the bible (as well as the Quran) that has dropped into the ocean; the result is a sense of spiritual alienation and recognition of the onset of moral dissolution: “He knows the Qur’an and the Bible / have washed page by page to shore, / their bindings stripped loose, their ink / blurred into the sea” (14-17).

Given these elements, the sea in both poems becomes a place where the sense of moral self is disoriented and the notion of subjectivity is trapped by the curse of hostile spaces and dangers, signified in Coleridge by freakish wind movements and signified in Turner by bombs laying on the beach. Put differently, although nature “release[s]” (8) the drowned combatant from the kelpscape to the “crests and shallows” (8) of the “drifting wave by wave back to the shore” (9), nature is unsympathetic and the ocean only sets in motion a monotonous “sounds in the bones / of his skull” (21-22). The lines evoke the mental-emotional burden that afflicts the combatant / mariner. Yet while in Turner’s image of the combatant’s corpse trapped in a kelpscape replete with “green leaves” (4) evokes the image of the Mariner’s ship surrounded by algae, by “charmèd water” (271) which “burnt always /A still and awful red” (271-272), no creature, or human being, tantamount in signification to the Coleridgean sea snakes, appears. Like Coleridge’s Mariner, who returns to the harbor/home a broken soul, the combatant self reaches the shore comatose physically as well as spiritually. One can argue that his inability

to swim (i.e., to save himself) is tantamount to the Mariner’s inability to pray. Turner’s poem seems to gesture toward the politico-ethical; it suggests that as in the Mariner’s killing of the Albatross, the 2003 war on Iraq was without foresight and legitimate motives; to participate in it was a form of moral transgression,

Notwithstanding, the symbolism of the albatross in Turner’s poem is ambiguous; one possible reading is that it betokens the former pre-combat self of the speaker who is “searching a route home” (24) to a moral world. In Coleridge, the Albatross can be related to a penitential attitude; in Turner’s poem certain lines gesture toward the possibility of penitential elements: “And if people are crying there, / wading out in the surf to carry it [the floating pages of the two holy books] all / back in, then he hasn’t seen them yet” (18-20). The “if” in the line emphasizes the probability of what can be interpreted as a penitential act, not its actuality or sureness. All these aspects encourage the reader to generalize that just as the Mariner’s telling of his tale is a cathartic act (though not in any absolute final sense), Turner’s writing of his war experience carries the import of a similar cathartic ministry. Yet the burden of a regretting mind will not be forever released: “[t]his time it’s beautiful” (1) in the world of pill-induced dreams; however, next times it may not be beautiful. As their discourses indicate, both poems end on a note that denies complete closure. If the Hermit in Coleridge’s poem asks the Mariner ““I bid thee say / What manner man art thou”” (577-78)? We are tempted to wonder what type of man is the combatant/poet who was beguiled into fighting in war like the Iraq 2003.¹²

The closing poems in *Here, Bullet* invoke the perception of a mind totally freed from the war’s metanarratives, relinquishing its status as combatant. What is perceived is a subject unable to open itself to the vibrancy of the civic world. In “Night in Blue,” the speaker is flying back to his homeland; he leaves Iraq with a sense of a wrenched out identity. The dark night outside matches in color his bleak, nearly

12 In an interview, Turner relates his reasons for going to the 2003 Iraq war: “I don’t think it was about wanting to be a hero, but it was about certain rites of passage or being branded by fire. Those are themes that probably, I hate to admit it, are in my psyche and that’s part of my reason for joining up. Other things were more practical and mundane, like I was recently married and I was trying to set up my family and pay back my college loans. We didn’t even have enough money for a pillow. The military took care of all of that” (3).

nihilistic, thoughts; what the end of the war discloses is a sense of an evacuated self, a conviction that neither salvation nor an inner reconciliation is attainable: "What do I know / of redemption or sacrifice, what will I have / to say of the dead—that it was worth it, / that any of it made sense? / I have no words to speak of war. / I never dug the graves in Talafar. / I never held the mother crying in Ramadi" (9-15). In "To Sand" Turner replays the experience of nihilism in an ecological key. Though the sentiment is typical, its imagery is not. The poem expresses unmitigated discursive surges of skeptical musings. The memory of "tracers and ball ammunition" (1) which, according to the laws of gravity, must eventually fall to the ground, initiate in the speaker's mind, a processive vortex where a gradual movement toward annihilation begins; the vortex not only affects each "finned mortar" (3), and "star cluster" (4), but also "reticles of the brain" (6), "the minarets and steeple bells" (7), "trashfires" (9) and other objects. Subscribing sarcastically to the notion of a world built on integrity, the speaker reduces the world's complexity to elemental sand, and the manifold and incoherence of a flowing existence dwindles to the singleness and clarity of sand.

While the speaker in *Here, Bullet* discerns the deceitfulness of metanarratives, he recognizes the undisputed authority of bio-neurology and human anatomy. The soldier's body is one saturated not only with casualty, in the physical sense of wounds and the psychological sense of stress and trauma, but also with adrenaline, all of which vex his/her agency. Because the combatant is not in space per se, but, to borrow a term from geography, in "spatial coordinates," and because his/her movements are organized around conceptions of victory and are dictated by the political-military establishments, and because he/she is acutely aware of a life where space and time are in a competition to overtake each other, his/her is a bifurcated consciousness. This consciousness is simultaneously aware of the innate as well as the learned/acquired, the reflexively bio-neurological as dictated by urges to fight and take flight as well as the rationally pragmatic as dictated by duty, discipline, and professionalism. Several poems pivot on the indispensable link between the bio-neurological and perseverance which is different from the romantic notion of heroism. As I suggested, in "Here, Bullet," the combatant's gestures and thoughts are projected as adrenaline inscriptions, the result of anxieties about the unexpected encounters

with the enemy in Iraq's swiftly changing militarized spheres. Just as he uses the unorthodox idioms of anatomy in "Here, Bullet": "the clavicle-snapped wish, / the aorta's opened valves, the leap / thought makes at the synaptic gap" (2-5), he uses them anew in "Katyusha Rockets" to underpin the combatant's anxious mental processes. In this poem, the "107s" (1) Katyushas which are fired at night and make a "cracking sound / of fire and electricity" (1-2) are interiorized, transforming into ideation, and they pound disturbing thoughts in the combatant's mind which he describes as "the night sky of the skull" (16). Their impact on the mind is deep and perturbing, for they move "down long avenues / of the brain's myelin sheathing, over synapses / and the rough structures of thought, they fall into the hippocampus, into the seat of memory" (14-17). As the poem indicates, the fear that the Katyushas generates is due to the fact that they can wound the combatant's head, which is the seat of memory and his sense of identity. Unlike the metanarratives surrounding America's superior warriors, in the battlefield, the combatant self is trapped in the bio-neurological workings of the body. Adrenaline and fear of a dysfunctional body structure the actions and thoughts of the combatant subject. The biological perspective allows Turner to put aside the heroic, mythical, white racio-centric framework in favor of a cross-disciplinary perspective that subverts the science/literature dichotomy and ushers in a prismatic vision of the combatant's humanness. Certain poems in *Here, Bullet* reflect the momentary peaceful moments when the combatant mind is free from the oppression of adrenaline and anatomical envisioning of a dysfunctional body. For example, in "R & R" when the speaker is "all out of adrenaline" (22) and "all out of smoking incendiaries" (23) he can dream of "a lover with hair that falls / like autumn leaves" (22-23) on his skin and "[b]irds that carry" (25) his "bullets into the barrel of the sun" (26).

With an awareness that the military and the civic interpenetrate, the combatant poetic self seems possessed by a wish to stand on the boundary of the two domains, glancing at both simultaneously. Therefore, unlike media coverage and military operations, the combatant self emphasizes not just the idea of a geographical location, but location as conjugated inextricably with a chronological scope that implicitly shapes his cognition.¹³ However, the

¹³Judith Butler explains the operative, west-centric logic of the human and legitimate war: "If the Islamic population

combatant's imagination glimpses more than historical allusions; it constructs, taking a lead from the word cinemascopic, what I call a historioscopic element. More than a mere linear regression into ancient times, the historioscopic is the evocation of a sweeping emotive envisioning of aspects of the past—events, habits, and figures—which are conjured up through a wide-angle, anamorphic, literary lens in order to project an ancient background or a cultural climate with a heightened visuality and panoramic opticality. Through the native, turbulent-free, historioscopic element, voices of the other/Iraqis emerge uttering moral perspectives, intellectual/philosophical speculations, and new vantage points of critical minds who have already debunked official metanarratives.

The historioscopic range in *Here, Bullet* is varied. Through conspicuous references to a seventh century B.C scribe/poet chiseling in cuneiform the epic of Gilgamesh on stone tablets ("Gilgamesh in Fossil Relief"), "Alhazen of Basra," and the biblical Garden of Eden ("*Mihrab*"), Iraq is defined by intellectual/literary feats, and scientific contributions, not by ethnic strife and outmoded/outlawed political systems, and not by the media false discourses on Iraq as storage for weapons of mass destruction. Analysis of "Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief" and "Alhazen of Basra" my best explains Turner's use of the historioscopic element.

"Gilgamesh" is dedicated to Sin-Lege-Unninni who was the master scribe and who, around 1600 BCE, wrote the famous Sumerian epic. His literary enterprise is to set in stone an enduring record of indigenous intellectual authority. In this, he has succeeded, for every soldier will be touched by the Gilgamesh agony and the loss of a friend/Enkidu. While in this poem the historioscopic is based on remembrance, in "Alhazen" allusions to the Iraqi past

takes on the form of a vision which affects the combatant-poet's discourse of the other. The combatant's question about how "light defines us" (11), suggests that his status as an active combatant has rattled his sense of self, that he desires to adjust his pre-combat philosophy. Through the act of writing this poem, the foreign combatant self becomes a protégé who gestures toward an authority higher than his military officers. In this poem the combatant reconciles himself to the other as trustworthy and knowledgeable. Amid his books and his scientific enterprises, Alhazen, like a shaman, can extend a spiritual map, can release poetic consciousness from its cultural isolation, and can carry poetic self to intellectual maturation. Moreover, Alhazen continues to circulate a transnational cultural capital. One might argue that the historioscopic opens the horizon of the "good" (in the abstract sense of the word) to subsume the other, and that it inscribes the dialogic principle in the self. However, in contrast to poems referencing Arab historical figures, reconciliation with the other as the contemporary Iraqi citizen is expressed with reticence, and its private mode is less articulated. Absent from the speaker's sympathetic depiction of contemporary Iraqi citizens is the personal communion he desires with Alhazen. To recapitulate, coherent, salient, and bringing to mind unique cultural structures, the historioscopic element in *Here, Bullet* has, nevertheless, a second role; it raises an important question: How do Iraqis civilians living on the periphery of the American postmodern military express their rage for normalcy and order.

The two-fold historioscopic/ biological perspective counters the two pariah images of the imperialist American superman and the terrorist Arab and it enables the combatant mind (and the reader at large) to sidestep essentialist notions of the other and to fathom the human predicament in war. Propagandist media discourages the viewer's consciousness from directing itself attentively to the subordinate subject because this may instigate counter-narratives. Consequently, by and large, this type of media pivots on visual strategies that encourage viewers to disown emotions of sympathy.¹⁴ In the 2003 US media images, a

destroyed in recent and current wars are considered less than human, or 'outside' the cultural conditions for the emergence of the human, then they belong either to a time of cultural infancy or to a time that is outside time as we know it. In both cases, they are regarded as not yet having arrived at the idea of the rational human. It follows from such a viewpoint that the destruction of such populations, their infrastructures, their housing, and their religious and community institutions, constitutes the destruction of what threatens the human, but not the human itself. It is also precisely this particular conceit of a progressive history that positions 'the West' as articulating the paradigmatic principles of the human—of humans who are worth valuing, whose lives are worth safeguarding, whose lives are precarious, and, when lost, are worth public grieving" (125).

14 On this point Bonnie Mann comments: "Weapons of mass destruction. The harboring of terrorists. Connections to al-Qaeda. These were the 'reasons' that turned preemption into self-defense, a war of imperialist aggression into a 'just war.' Months later, when the 'reasons' melted away into half-baked

excuses and repeated, though evidently baseless and fanciful speculations, most U.S. Americans weren't particularly surprised. Domestic support for the war waned slightly, but remained for a time remarkably strong in the absence of any substantive justification for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. . . . It seemed that the people of the United States didn't really need Bush's reasons in order to support Bush's war" (147; 148).

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prevailing hierarchal structure was at work: American male combatants were imaged as possessing valid authority and power and were positioned higher up on a scale of importance than the Iraqi humans. Thus, while in the media coverage they were accorded some presence, the subordinate Iraqis were defined as collateral damage, or complementary statistics of a fast-paced broadcasted report. Iraqi casualties were mentioned in order to give the news an air of fair coverage, yet using, commonly, language that normalized chaos and disorder in the Middle East.

In opposition to this media view, Turner's techniques in *Here, Bullet*, by and large, involve two simultaneous gestures: deconstructing the militaristic and media approach to Iraq and reconstructing a nuanced image of the place and its inhabitants. Certain poems, for example, "Into the Elephant Grass," "Trowel," "Easel," and "Milh," associate the Iraqi subject with his/her native landscape. In these poems, the poetic voice presents us with images of a pure civic existence; though the subjects who are described are troubled by war, their actions emphasize the priority of fortitude over grief. "Trowel" and "Milh" best illustrate the attitude of the combatant poetic self to otherness.

In "Trowel," the two civilian laborers, Abid and Hussein, whose "arm is scarred / elbow to wrist from the long war with Iran" (4-5), not only repair a house, with "bullet-pocked" (7) walls in preparation of the Kurdish holiday (i.e., *Nawroz* which literally meaning new day) but also reconstruct their lives unhindered by a sense of victimhood. Their faith and sense of an indigenous identity empower their volition, and the trowel—the antithesis of the gun/bullet—becomes the tool that sustains their passion for life, whose fountain is within. Hussein's simple and normal act of "burying the lead" (10), with elemental "mud" (7) despite "his hand's familiar tremor" (9), appears as regenerative and resonating with the symbolism of the ancient festival of *Nawroz* as new beginnings and

Turner, Brian. *Here, Bullet.* Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2005. Print.

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the capacity to hold aesthetic drives.

Like "Trowel," "Milh" is a poem about the resilient grace of humble Iraqi civilians. The poem depicts Iraqi women, from the north of Babylon, engaged in the seemingly apolitical activity of harvesting salt. Their black clothes denote their low social class as well as their experience with loss. The correlation of women and peaceful salt gathering not only foregrounds the reality of their labor but also their nourishing folk customs. The word "milh" (salt in Arabic) points to the root of existence. Because they are standing "[a]nkle deep in the white-ochre saltflats" (1), the salt literally grounds the women's sense of community in the permanence of the land. Although, as sites, these saltflats are ancient, they are also inaugural for demonstrating the resilience of a nation: "they cup their palms and reach / down with the cracked skin of their hands / softened by water, to lift what is precious" (12-14). Nevertheless, the poem's symbolic thrust is wider. Several significations coincide in the word "milh": the realm of native Arabic language; the natural material, which though its chemical agency, can reshape objects; a substance which is at the heart of daily living and ancient rituals; a substance that cleanses and guards against decay. E. S. Drower explains that:

Salt has been employed in Iraq for exorcism since the earliest times. On account of its whiteness and preservative qualities it is associated with life and the soul. The Arabic *melh*, the Babylonian *tabtu* have both a double meaning of goodness and wholesomeness. Babylonians believed that the god En-lil ordained salt (*tabtu*) 'as the food of the great gods, without which no god, king, master, and prince smells the fragrance (of cooked food)' (348).

The speaker's description of the women hints at the mythical; because of atmospheric factors of water, and intense sun light, he sees the women "as if / they walk on the water's surface" (6-7); and the salt appears as "the gold-leafed dust of antiquity / which washes and sifts through their fingers" (15-16). These rural women vex temporality; engaged in performative acts, they evoke an archetypal wholesome image, which can furnish the basis of perceiving the humanity of the other. Notwithstanding, Turner's poetic approach to the issue of otherhood goes beyond finding a stark alterity. He also registers the commonalities between the American combatant and the Iraqi other. Two poems will elucidate my point.

In "2000 lbs," for example, the combatant poetic

self traces similarities which exist between Iraqi and American subjects who are both victims of a suicide bombing. Exhibiting a focus on personhood, the speaker gives attention to what can be seen as local narratives and personal histories. I quote two examples from the poem: Sefwan, a taxi driver, who just before the "the street's concussion of metal" (19) and "shrapnel / traveling the speed of sound" (20), is thinking "of summer 1974, lifting / pitchforks of grain in the air / the slow drift of it like the fall of Shathah's hair" (10-12), a woman he loved but did not marry. Like Sefwan, the "civil affairs officer" (65), Lt. Jackson's thought were on love before the blast amputated his hands turning them into "these absurd stumps held in the air" (68). Jackson was blowing bubbles from a "plastic ring" (71) dipped in soup, "something for the children, something beautiful, / translucent globes with their iridescent skins" (74-75). While Jackson dies, his "small globes" (78) drift "on vehicle exhaust and the breeze" (76). To eliminate vertical boundaries which may betoken a hierarchy, thus deflecting the possibility of a hierarchical scale of human worth, where American lives are given higher value and a more prominent significance, the stanzas moves repeatedly from Iraqi civilian to American soldier. The poem offers a new paradigm of the relationship between American soldier and Iraqi subject. Here there is no chasm between one American casualty of terrorism and an Iraqi one. In the world of death, American and Iraqi victims hear the same "strange incantation" (111) from "the telephone line snapped in two" (110), and "they wander confused amongst one another, / learning each other's names, trying to comfort / the living in their grief" (112-114).

Admittedly, most poems that are focused on alterity give the impetus to re-read Iraq, and it is cogent to explicate briefly the poetic self's perceptual strategies of the other as civilian. A salient strategy is that a distance between the combatant poetic self and the described Iraqi subjects is persistently maintained by, first, foregrounding the fact that he mostly watches them through the military instrument/technology of the Leupold Scope (or similar tools) while they are unaware and, second, by coloring his tone with a sense of curiosity rather than claiming any real or firsthand knowledge of them. Put differently, in these poems, Turner's consciousness seems less constituted by his positionality as an alien combatant in an occupied land and more impelled by a desire to sidestep the restrictions of his whiteness

and maleness. Although his refusal to meddle in the scenes lessens the reciprocity, it, paradoxically, bolsters his appreciation of alterity. Attention to these subjects renders the combatant self unaggressive when compared to the belligerent tone of poems where alterity is totally absent. This is evident, for example, in "Body Bags," where we see the soldiers' urge to ontologize dead Iraqis as objects, as "body bags" which they maliciously kick while using language saturated with profanities: "Last call, motherfucker: last call" (14).

Notwithstanding, the poems in *Here, Bullet* suggest that the traits that this study has expounded of the combatant poetic consciousness are personal, not collective. To elucidate, in the poem "Autopsy," Staff Sergeant Garza, "affairs specialist / from Missouri" (1-2) dissects the body of a dead American soldier, "cuts the cord which bind the heart" (8) so that the "weighing" (9) and the "measuring of the organ" (10) is accurate, while listening to the song "there's a long black cloud hanging in the sky, honey" (3). Garza's attitude reflects the paradigm shift in the postmodern military that emphasizes pure professionalism in accomplishing a mission. Controlled by a positivistic scientific mindset, she perceives the soldier's body instrumentally, as an object to be dissected for medical evidence; she does not open herself to a dialogue about the meaning of war. Because she

emulates the voyeuristic gaze of the fun-seeker/spectator—"she can't help / but imagine how fast it beat when he first kissed / Shawna Allen, or how it became heavy / with whiskey"(10-13)—Garza's gaze diminishes the few imperatives of military ethics. In combining her favorite entertaining song with agile professional practicality and a lurid apathy, Garza embodies the postmodern combatant who is the opposite of the poetic combatant.

To conclude, more than a testimony, the poetic voice of Brian Turner in *Here, Bullet* develops refined perspectives on trauma, combatant cognition, and otherness that depart from the usual scope of war poetry. Emphasizing the interrogative disposition of the combatant poetic self, *Here, Bullet* attempts to subvert mediatized bipolar attitudes and Turner's war poetry manifests itself as a hermeneutics of suspicion towards metanarratives that are promoted by the US political and military establishments. In keeping with this hermeneutics, the combatant poetic self is endowed with a dual role: he is an interpreter of the horrors of war and the morally grotesque, and an intermediary between the fortitude of the Iraqi subject and that which is aesthetic and moral. It is through these two roles that the combatant poetic self distance itself from the postmodern military and fits into the traditional universal image of the human.

الأنماط الإدراكية عند الشاعر - المحارب في زمن ما بعد الحداثة: تحليل لديوان بريان تيرنر

"هنا، أيتها الرصاصة"

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنماط الإدراكية، الشاعر المحارب، عصر الحداثة، ديوان بريان تيرنر
ملخص البحث: تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوع العلاقة بين وعي الذات الشاعرة في ساحة المعركة وبين المؤسسة العسكرية الأمريكية في زمن ما بعد الحداثة. وتتخذ الدراسة من ديوان الشاعر الأمريكي بريان تيرنر المعنون "هنا، أيتها الرصاصة" أنموذجاً، وتذهب الدراسة أن ديوان تيرنر يلقي أضواءً كاشفة على الأنماط الإدراكية/المعرفية في وعي الشاعر-المحارب. وتتقصى الدراسة أربعة أنماط تأتي في الديوان: رفض مصداقية الروايات الكبرى (حسب تعريف ليوتار لهذا المصطلح)؛ الاهتمام بـ"بجماليون" البيولوجيا والاضطرابات العصبية-النفسية؛ استحضار منظور تاريخي رحب؛ وإضفاء المركزية على الآخر المختلف ثقافياً. وحيث أن الديوان ينطوي على نقد متعدد الأوجه، يتجلى الدور السوسي وثقافي للشاعر-المحارب في تقويض ما يقوم به الإعلام الأمريكي من تبجيل وإسباغ البطولة الاسطورية على المقاتل عن بُعد (أي الذي يُعول في معاركه على الفضاء الافتراضي للشبكة العنكبوتية) ومقارنة هذا مع ما يحصل حقيقة في واقع غث و سقيم عرفه الشاعر عن قرب حيث أنه شارك كجندي من المشاة في حرب الخليج الثالثة التي شنتها الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية على العراق عام ٢٠٠٣ م.

