
The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*

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Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* (2005) represents a historical milestone in American literature. This collection of poems by Fresno, California's native son is the first single-authored collection of poems to come out of a personal experience of the Iraq War—a fact that makes Turner America's first major soldier-poet of the 21st century. But while the volume has received international recognition, at home its reception has been relatively muted and mixed. One explanation might be that as a soldier-poet Turner bears witness, but he does so in a fashion that many reviewers describe as “non-partisan,” and this might alienate some readers on both ends of the political spectrum. For other readers, Turner's political subtlety invites comparison with the poetry of the Pulitzer prize-winning Vietnam War veteran Yusef Komunyakaa. But whereas Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) appeared thirteen years after the official end of the Vietnam War, Turner wrote most of the poems in *Here, Bullet* while on active duty in Iraq. This fact makes all the more remarkable the poet's ability to combine emotive power with aesthetic distance. The distancing strategies of *Here, Bullet* are crucial to representation and individualization, and intimately tied to the white military subjectivity of its speaker.

At a reading in Fresno,¹ I asked Brian Turner how, as a soldier in Iraq, he had managed to keep sight of the individuality of the Iraqi people, as evidenced in *Here, Bullet*. He answered that it was not easy; that no matter how much he wanted to interact personally with an Iraqi civilian, what that person beheld in his approach was not another individual but an armed and uniformed American. He added wryly that it's hard to have a casual exchange with people if you're always carrying a gun. Until Turner phrased it that way, I had not visualized the impossibility of a normal conversation between Iraqi individuals and American soldiers in occupied Iraq, however well-meaning a soldier might be. But I was also struck by Turner's comment because of the way it underscored the mutuality and interdependence of identity constructions. Turner was saying that it was hard to have a sense of individual Iraqis because there was no context in which *he* could appear as an individual to them. What must that do to you, I wondered, to

know that for all the power you wield, your thoughts, feelings, and experiences are irrelevant; that to the people around you, you are not a person but an abstract representation of power—of uniformed, white American masculinity? How, then, would you represent those people and, above all, yourself in the poetry that tries to process and articulate the experience? This crucial question of (self)representation undergirds Turner's poems in *Here, Bullet*, and in response Turner minimizes the speaker's white military subjectivity. Specifically, Turner's poetic strategies include narrative descriptions, a focus on exteriority and smallness, evocations of Iraq's ancient history, and a reliance on the surreal. Together, these emphases enable the speaker in Turner's poems to keep sight of the humanity of the Iraqis around him and thereby to construct and preserve a self-identity in the face of his paradoxically empowering and obliterating, uniformed whiteness. Turner's treatment of identity as relational and mutually constructed enables empathy, not only between the speaker and the Iraqis of whom he writes, but also between the reader and the people of Iraq. In a climate of war, when poetry's relevance to our lives is frequently challenged, Turner's *Here, Bullet* demonstrates that the kind of imaginative and aesthetic engagement that poetry at its best elicits is, at the same time, an ethical engagement with the ideal of human connectivity in the face of war's annihilations.

The question of representation has many dimensions here: how does any artist represent an otherized group without appropriation? How does the poet represent war without reducing the poetic imagination to protest? And how does the lyric subject represent itself with any degree of relevance during wartime?

While Turner's *Here, Bullet* contributes to American war literature specifically and is often compared to the writings of Vietnam war veterans Yusef Komunyakaa, Tim O'Brien, Bruce Weigl, and others, it may also be placed within the broader context of a long history of texts by white authors who venture to distant lands and report back to their home audiences what they have gleaned from their travels. Much has been written, especially from postcolonial perspectives, about the power dynamics inherent in such writings: the power of the white, Western subject to gaze upon and represent an objectified and frequently orientalized other, and to package and market this other for mainstream consumption at home. My reading of Turner's poems asserts that even in the extraordinary setting of a military invasion, the speaker of *Here, Bullet* resists the impulse of the white Western gaze and, thereby, the rote performances of whiteness at the nexus of racial-national difference. Critiques of such rote performances find articulation in recent scholarship on war poetry, specifically. Philip Metres, whose 2007 book *Behind the Lines* discusses American war resistance poetry since World War II,

consistently engages with the issues not only of lyric subjectivity and poetic form but of representation in a military context: “How does the poet deal with not only the unrepresentability of war but also the politics of representing other cultures, in light of Orientalism?” he asks (Metres 15).

Germane to Metres’ profound question about the representability of war in light of orientalism and racial-cultural difference is the yet more fundamental issue of poetic relevance in wartime. At a joint reading with Bruce Weigl, Turner reminded us that the death of poetry has been proclaimed in various generations (Turner and Weigl). Thus Alice Templeton, in her provocative essay “What’s the Use: Writing Poetry in Wartime,” asks what point there is in poets trying to represent anything at all in a climate of war. Referring to Sam Hamill’s 2003 edited volume *Poets Against the War*, Templeton declares her sense of “artistic depletion” both as a reader of contemporary antiwar poetry and as a poet herself. Especially relevant is Templeton’s critique of the volume’s first-hand poetry of witness:

The poems of “authentic” witness, many of which are journalistic in tone and stylistically interchangeable, most often sustain the war-dominated imagination they claim to write against. My question is, then, what kind of lyric aesthetic—what kind of first-person authenticity—does writing in wartime require to be both authoritative and truthful? What is it about writing about war that, apparently, tends to reduce poetic singularity to a monotonous flatness, exhausting language itself? And, finally, if poetic language so seldom exceeds the us/them binaries and brutalities of uncritical rhetoric, then what is the use of writing poetry in the consciousness of wartime? (Templeton 44)

These are urgent questions for poetry in our time. Templeton recognizes that the same questions occurred for Muriel Rukeyser in the midst and wake of World War II, and draws on Rukeyser’s discussions for her own critical responses. Templeton suggests that modern warfare challenges the traditional lyric, which centers on individual consciousness, because in the threat of mass, mechanized destruction, “the lyric self necessarily confronts its participation and stake in the collective destiny” (54). War calls for a poetic response that “must be not merely a reenactment of narrow habits of consciousness in the guise of social critique, but a type of ‘creation’ (Rukeyser 213) that connects us to vital imaginative resources in traditions of art and inquiry, and that finds compassionate commonality with others through consciousness of the self” (57). Such poetry, by engaging a full, imaginative and emotive response, negates the power of war to obliterate the sources of peace and creation within us: “Poetry does its most powerful anti-war work at that very site where poetic imagination is most at risk, where the determinisms and despair of war-thought threaten to obscure the ‘everyday,

infinite and commonplace' (213) sources of peace that poetry, at its best, opens to us" (57). With the speaker's subjectivity in *Here, Bullet*, Turner not only eschews the dangers to which Templeton finds war poetry susceptible but, at his best, elicits the empathy and connection that full imaginative engagement makes possible.

Identifying the subjectivity of the speaker in Turner's poems presents a tricky task. While we have been schooled to distinguish between speaker and poet, *Here, Bullet* invites a conflation of the two. Not only do we hear a consistent and recognizable voice throughout the volume, but splashed across the cover is a photograph of Brian Turner himself, in armed and uniformed whiteness, on terrain that we readily assume to be Iraq. So, the distinction between poet and speaker, or among the speakers of the various poems, becomes largely irrelevant.² In the absence of a racial or sexual qualifier, we may assume this speaker to be white and male, in consonance with Turner's photographic image of himself on the cover. The speaker of *Here, Bullet* can be characterized as cerebral and knowledgeable in his learned allusions, a persona whose voice communicates itself as thoughtful, deliberate, and controlled, though not dispassionate. The most striking aspect of his voice consists in its personal deflections, marked by an insistent focus on exteriority. In the words of a weblog review of Turner's poem "Observation Post #71": "Turner's goal, both overt and in the fabric of it, is to hide himself, to disappear in the face of events of unimaginable violence or pathos..." I see these "hidings" as Turner's poetic strategy for erasing, evading, or mitigating his speaker's white military subjectivity.

In the musings of the speaker of *Here, Bullet*, we see Turner's attempts to reconcile his white American military presence in Iraq with the identity of a white American poet documenting and imaginatively recasting his experiences there. While many of Yusef Komunyakaa's poems in *Dien Cai Dau* (1988)—"Facing It," "Tu Do Street," "Hanoi Hannah," and "One-Legged Stool," for instance—make explicit reference to the speaker's blackness, the implicit whiteness of Turner's speaker remains unnamed in the volume. In part, this happens because whiteness has the privilege of not having to name itself in authorial contexts: both writer and reader assume that if an author, narrator, or speaker is white ("neutral"), race has no bearing on the text. Thus while Komunyakaa's blackness and its relationship to his Vietnam War poetry has been the subject of lively discussion,³ to date no review of Turner's work has commented on the role that whiteness might play in his work. Turner himself, in talks and interviews, makes reference to his identity as an American soldier in Iraq, but not to his identity as a *white* American soldier in Iraq. Yet Turner's poetry is by no means raceless in comparison to Komunyakaa's. To the contrary, *Here, Bullet* is preoccupied with race in its oblique but consistent attempts to simultaneously register, negotiate, and erase the speaker's whiteness.

How does Turner acknowledge, yet minimize, his speaker's white military subjectivity? One of his poetic strategies is to cast the speaker's thoughts and memories in the form of narrative description. Reviewers have commented on this unusual choice, not always in positive terms. One anonymous review in the online *Poetry Book Review* finds *Here, Bullet* to be often "detached," as though the speaker is "standing on the sidelines like an interested reporter." The reviewer concludes that "Linguistically, emotionally, Turner is not a risk taker," and that the detachment and disinterestedness of the verse marks the volume's "biggest weakness." To the contrary, what Alice Templeton says of Carolyn Forché's poem "The Colonel" applies as well to *Here, Bullet*: it "gives us not only the external narrative, but also the subtly rendered drama of the poet's difficult internal self-restraint, the complexity of what is necessarily repressed in the telling" (Templeton 48). The narrative descriptions in *Here, Bullet* lend themselves to easier camouflage of the speaker's difficult white, male, military subjectivity in occupied Iraq. Turner's speaker observes, describes, and reports; there is seldom an overt intrusion of, or reference to, the self. His introspectiveness manifests itself only obliquely through his "apparently nonpartisan" descriptions (Turner and Weigl). Even the poem "What Every Soldier Should Know," which has a rare focus on the subjectivity of the American soldier, has this distant narrative tone:

If you hear gunfire on a Thursday afternoon,
it could be for a wedding, or it could be for you.

....

There are shopping carts with clothes soaked
in foogas, a sticky gel of homemade napalm.
Parachute bombs and artillery shells
sewn into the carcasses of dead farm animals.
Graffiti sprayed onto the overpasses:

I will kill you, American. (9)

The speaker provides no commentary on his observations; he merely describes. But this is no journalistic description, emptied of emotive content. Rather, the poet's careful juxtaposition of mundane and shocking images speaks of the daily horrors that the speaker has witnessed and survived—horrors which the poet must represent with self-restraint. The familiar everyday quality of "Thursday afternoon" and clothes piled in shopping carts, and the bucolic tranquility suggested by "farm animals" are disrupted by images of unpredictable violence. Disturbingly, the images entangle death with life, defying the human desire to keep them separate. Gunfire is associated as much with the celebratory, life-affirming, and communal spirit of a wedding as it is with a bullet aimed at oneself; "homemade" calls up

the nurturing space of a kitchen, only to be applied to napalm; and life-giving farm animals are not only themselves dead but harbor agents of death within their carcasses. The playful irrelevance of “graffiti” becomes a politically charged death-threat, itself articulated with what might be mistaken for a child’s misspelling of “kill.” Although the speaker is describing presumably personal experiences, he opens with the second-person pronoun, at once distancing himself from the action and implicating the reader in it. Thus the speaker’s apparently “detached” narrative descriptions minimize his own subjectivity without compromising the emotive power of the poem.

Turner’s narrative descriptions also serve what I call an aesthetic of smallness: against the implicit magnitude of war, it juxtaposes small particulars, the natural and the mundane.⁴ As Templeton concludes with Rukeyser: “Poetry does its most powerful anti-war work at that very site where poetic imagination is most at risk, where the determinisms and despair of war-thought threaten to obscure the ‘everyday, infinite and commonplace’ (213)” (Templeton 58). In Turner’s poetry, just such an emphasis on the small and the commonplace enables the speaker to simultaneously deflect attention from his own interiority and to register his consciousness of an Iraqi landscape inhabited by ordinary people. One aspect of Turner’s aesthetic of smallness manifests itself in the sensuous descriptions of natural objects. As Joel Brouwer says in his review of *Here, Bullet* for *The New York Times*: “Turner’s most consistent mode is one of brisk, precise—and nonpartisan—attention to both the terrors and the beauty he found among Iraq’s ruins. In these poems, Iraq emerges from the fog of political oratory into tangibility, becoming a place of ‘artillery shells / sewn into the carcasses of dead farm animals,’ but also a place where ‘Thistleweed bursts open in purple / while honeybees drone and hover.’” Descriptions of small, natural objects that form part of the landscape of Iraq lend immediacy to Turner’s poems, but they also comment on the war without drawing attention to the speaker’s own agency. Consider, for instance, this stanza from “Hwy 1”:

Cranes roost atop power lines in enormous
bowl-shaped nests of sticks and twigs,
and when a sergeant shoots one from the highway
it pauses, as if amazed that death has found it
here, at 7 A.M. on such a beautiful morning,
before pitching over the side and falling
in a slow unraveling of feathers and wings. (6)

The lens lingers on the crane’s beauty as part of the beautiful morning, its nest testifying to its life-affirming labor. The act of shooting the crane is described in a clause that does not permit the reader, syntactically, to focus on this gratuitous

act of violence because the lens quickly returns to the crane and pauses there, like the crane itself, before the lines recount its fall in slow motion. Its slow unraveling is like the unraveling of a human life in war: for all its dignity, grace, and purpose, it succumbs, suddenly and irreversibly, to the random violence—a picture of irrecoverable loss and tragic waste. Turner manages to suggest all this in his narration of a nature-centered moment. The evocation of the natural world, its energies focused on nurturing rather than annihilating life, enables him to tap into a universal language unobtrusively.

Turner's aesthetic of smallness includes an emphasis on the particularity of the individual. His poetry brings into focus the gestures, thoughts, and implied histories of ordinary individuals living in Iraq. "Trowel" offers a close-up of Hussein and Abid preparing their home for the Kurdish holiday with trowels that "[smooth] mud against a bullet-pocked wall" (24). The speaker's gaze lingers almost caressingly on Hussein's arm, which is scarred and tremulous from the war with Iran. This individualizing gaze acquires greater complexity in "Observation Post #798" and "In the Leupold Scope," two poems in which the act of focusing on a human object becomes quite literal. In both poems, the speaker, looking through his binoculars, focuses his gaze on an Iraqi woman who appears on her rooftop. "Observation Post #798" describes a prostitute on the rooftop of a brothel, "smoking a cigarette and shaking loose her long hair" (41), while "In the Leupold Scope" comments on a woman in "sparkling green," hanging her laundry on an invisible line (7). On one level, these are inescapably trite moments, fraught with sexual and racial tension, in which the white male subject gazes on a racialized, exoticized, and sexualized female object. The objectified female not only does not gaze back but remains unaware of the male gaze focused on her. The power dynamic between active gazer and passive object of gaze reveals itself explicitly here, and to this extent the poems fall into a recognizable genre in cultural representations of race and gender relations. However, Turner transforms the cliché moment to give us a sense of Iraqi lives, past and present. As the speaker gazes through the Leupold scope, the woman's mundane act of hanging her laundry on the line becomes an act of clothing the dead as they are welcomed back to earth:

She waits for them to lean forward
into the breeze, for the wind's breath
to return the bodies they once had,
women with breasts swollen by milk,
men with shepherd-thin bodies, children
running hard into the horizon's curving lens. (7)

The lines narrate a fleeting moment that captures the beauty of the woman's gestures in the wind, but they also visualize the Iraqi dead as flesh-and-blood

individuals, including nursing mothers, who must have once hung clothes on a laundry line themselves. Similarly, the speaker in “Observation Post #798” begins with the avowed intent of gazing on a sexual object: “I scan each story with binoculars / and a smile, hoping to glimpse the girls” (41); but by the end of the poem, he recognizes his gaze to be less about desire than about surviving loss. He looks at the long-haired prostitute

... as a ghost might gaze upon the one he loves,

Thinking, *how lovely you are*,
your pain and beauty a fiction
I bend into the form of a bridge, anything
To remind me I am still alive. (41)

These lines illustrate Kenny Brechner’s comment that Turner is “effective in evoking loss through connections between the observer and the observed.” Further, underscoring Turner’s treatment of identity as relational and interdependent, the speaker realizes that his own humanity depends upon his recognition of the humanity of this Iraqi woman.

Turner’s individualization of Iraqi people in *Here, Bullet* also serves to decenter perspective. Such decentering proves an effective strategy in deflecting attention away from the white military subjectivity of the speaker. The multiplicity of vantage points also affirms the postmodernist assumption that truth is a matter of perspective, which depends upon social location. Turner’s self-consciousness about perspective is evident in his exchange with Patrick Hicks:

T: I’m a very incomplete spokesperson because there are so many voices and my book even tries to acknowledge that because there are poems like “OP #71” and “OP #798”. It’s a discursive nod to the reader to say that --

H: *That there are other Observation Posts out there? Other viewpoints?*

T: Yeah, yeah. Where’s #797? #796? #802? 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? (Turner, “A Conversation”)

Turner’s comment preempts the tendency of readers to position him as the central, authentic voice of the Iraq War—a representational burden that inevitably befalls an author whose work happens to be among the first to articulate a national experience. Just as Lan Cao’s novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997) refuses to yield a stable, monolithic history of the mutual experiences of Vietnamese and Americans during

wartime, insisting instead that each individual soldier's and civilian's perspective brings "his little piece of a big history" (Cao 209), so Turner suggests not only the multiplicity of "observation posts" but the multiplicity of recorded history. In "Ferris Wheel," the speaker recognizes that what he experiences as an authentic moment will elude official records altogether: "The history books will get it wrong. / There will be nothing written / about the island ferris wheel / frozen by rust like a broken clock, or / about the pilot floating unconscious downriver" (55). What remains for the speaker, as for Turner, is the authenticity of personal memory, cast in a poetry of witness, which must locate itself among a multiplicity of such memories in order to be meaningful. In this way, Turner's poetry transcends the narrowness of the lyric consciousness that Metres, Templeton, and others see as threatening to render poetry irrelevant during wartime.

Turner's snapshots of individuals throughout the volume culminate in the heterogeneous perspectives juxtaposed in the poem "2000 lbs." Of this poem, one reviewer has said: "In fifty to a hundred years, this is the poem that teachers will use to teach the Iraq War, much as Wilfred Owen's poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est' is used when discussing the First World War" (Dooley). The speaker of "2000 lbs." imagines the actions, thoughts, and feelings of seven different people—four Iraqi civilians, two American soldiers, and the suicide bomber himself—moments before his bomb explodes in a Mosul marketplace and kills them. The poem is remarkable for the beauty with which it renders a single, multifaceted moment separating life from death. In the final seconds of his life, Sefwan remembers a bygone rural summer, "and he regrets how so much can go wrong in a life / how easily the years slip by, light as grain, bright / as the street's concussion of metal" (42). The blast reduces the young couple Rasheed and Sefa to the lifelessness of the manikins in the bridal store "who cannot touch / one another, who cannot kiss, / who now lie together in glass and debris, / holding one another in their half-armed embrace, / calling this love, if this is all there will ever be." The bomb severs Lieutenant Jackson's hand as, from his Humvee, he blows soap bubbles, something beautiful and hopeful for the children on the street. It kills the grandmother begging by the roadside, cradling a baby, in a death she would not have believed possible:

*To have your heart broken one last time
before dying, to kiss a child given sight
of a life he could never live? It's impossible,
this isn't the way we die. (45)*

The poem blurs the speaker's own subjectivity as it describes the moment from multiple perspectives and subject positions. We do not ask where he himself was

at the time of the explosion, what he was thinking or feeling, or what his actions might have been in the wake of the violence. At the same time, the multiple centers of consciousness in the poem exemplifies how poetry at its best enables empathy and the kind of connectedness that Rukeyser, Templeton, and others have posited as the most potent form of artistic resistance to war. Turner's vignettes in "2000 lbs." represent an array of social, political, economic, and ethnic positionings, yet in all cases the individual's last thoughts are of "love and wreckage" in the most wrenchingly human of ways. As one reviewer says of the poem: "In addition to fixing in time an isolated moment of horror in the center of a war zone, Turner also aptly captures an iconic act emblematic of an entire period of history. Few poems show such potential for moving readers so emotionally while at the same time inviting intellectual and ethical reflection, requesting that readers investigate the tenuous thread by which any life hangs" (Byrne). Turner, on more than one occasion, has expressed his belief that the power to enable empathy is what distinguishes poetry from journalism. Guthmann quotes him as saying: "I wanted to add to what people back home already knew"—death counts, roadside bombings, prison torture—"but at the same time I think we also need to know the humanity and the love, the loss, things on a deeper, emotional level. That to me is the domain of poetry." His poem "2000 lbs." enables precisely the empathy and human connectivity that are among war's most lamentable casualties.

Perhaps Turner's most conspicuous poetic strategy for simultaneously minimizing his speaker's white, male, military subjectivity and establishing an empathetic bond with Iraqis lies in his allusions to Iraq's ancient history and rich cultural productions, and to Arab contributions to modern civilization generally. Except for a quotation each from Rousseau, Hemingway, and Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix, every one of Turner's epigraphs and learned allusions comes from the Quran, or from Iraqi proverbs, Iraqi poets, and classical Arab historians, physicists, etc. The landscape itself, as Turner describes it, inhabits two temporal spaces at once: while the present surroundings are pictured in vivid sensuous detail, Turner emphasizes the continuity between this enduring landscape and human history in references to Babylon, Najaf, Nineveh, and Sumer. In "Hwy 1," the speaker is alive to the fact that his convoy follows "the spice road of old":

... past the ruins of Babylon and Sumer,
through the land of Gilgamesh where the minarets
sound the muezzin's prayer, resonant and deep. (6)

The ancient epic of *Gilgamesh* appears again in the poem "Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief," dedicated to Sin-lege-unninni, the 7th-century B.C.E. poet who carved

the Sumerian epic onto stone tablets. Turner makes a more emphatic connection between past and present in this poem:

It is an old story now. It was an old story then,
full of gods and beasts and the inevitable
points of no return each age must learn.

....

History is a cloudy mirror made of dirt
and bone and ruin. And love? Loss? (53)

The speaker's invocation of *Gilgamesh* and his other allusions to ancient Iraqi and Arab culture insist on our viewing Iraq through a dual lens, a double vision that juxtaposes a rich, albeit humanly flawed past, with a present that is unfolding as he speaks, in convoys, bomb blasts, and artillery shells. The moral and social fabric decays under fire: in "The Al Harishma Weapons Market," Akbar sees no contradiction between selling the ammunition that will destroy his childhood friends in uniform, and then turning to comfort his four-year-old son to sleep. Such narrative moments in a poetry collection conspicuously framed by references to ancient Iraqi civilization provide a subtle political critique. Ben Dooley sums it up:

Turner takes a risk, unique at least in my reading, by making a genuine attempt to understand the people ... he fights for and against. Where many poets have addressed their enemy as a faceless other, acknowledging, at best, the universality of human suffering, Turner has clearly studied Iraq and makes a concerted effort to use what he has learned to draw a clearer picture of the war. Excerpts from the Qur'an and historical references provide some necessary context for the war... Turner skillfully deploys this knowledge, sharing it with the reader in lessons in the book's introductory poems, then building on those lessons, exposing the reader to the same words and images until what was once unfamiliar resonates deeply. This resonance combines with a (considering the circumstances) remarkable display of imaginative empathy to create Turner's best poems.

Dooley's comment underscores the ways in which Turner's poetry preempts an American audience's tendency to collapse Iraq's identity with the ongoing Iraq War. *Here, Bullet* insists on placing contemporary Iraq in the context of its larger history and the continuity of its contributions to the world. References to Iraqi and Arab writers, philosophers, and mathematicians that might have been alien to the reader become familiar as they accrue, and this familiarity prepares the way for empathy. A parallel process (on which Dooley does not comment) is the subtle and effective muffling of the speaker's own voice; rather than comment on events directly, the speaker borrows the "authentic" voices of ancient Iraqis.

However, for all his attempts at self-erasure, the speaker's agency and white subjectivity inevitably find expression in oblique ways. If identity is relational, then the identity of the speaker of *Here, Bullet* must reveal itself in the words and images he uses to depict Iraq and its people. In particular, we can discern the outlines of the speaker's white military subjectivity if we look through the critical lens that Toni Morrison has provided us with in her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison suggests that the presence of an enslaved black population fired the imagination, and enabled the self-definition, of white Americans in the early years of the Republic, and that this self-reflexiveness manifests itself in the literary meditations of 19th-century Dark Romantics. As Morrison puts it: "The subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (Morrison 17). Similar to Edward Said's suggestion that the white Western self constructs itself vis-à-vis an "Oriental" other, Morrison argues that the blackness that hovers on the peripheries of many of the canonical texts in American literature reveals how white Americans—men, especially—perceived themselves in the decades following the founding of America. Important for my argument here, the white writerly engagement with blackness which Morrison identifies is seldom overt or explicit: the Africanist presence "is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation" (Morrison 46-47). Both the self-image and self-doubt of the Dark Romantics seep through their oblique imaginative engagement with darkness, itself "an extraordinary meditation on the self." Extending Morrison's argument, while there is no enslaved black population against which the speaker of *Here, Bullet* defines himself, his dominant subject position as a white American soldier in an occupied Arab land—and his unease with regard to this identity—articulate themselves symbolically in the interplay of light and shadow, and in the surrealism of ghostly presences throughout the volume.

The pervasive references to light and shadow, white and black, in Turner's poetry invite a Morrison-esque interpretation. Images of displaced whiteness abound: the speaker projects his own whiteness on the "white-knuckled" suicide bomber of "2000 lbs.," on the ubiquitous white cowbirds, on the pale faces of corpses, and even on the sun—"how bright it is, how hard and flat and white" (35). Stark black-white contrasts appear in "Curfew," which opens with the image of bats and closes with undefined "white birds" rising from the Tigris River, and in "Milh," which contrasts the "white-ochre saltflats" with the blackness of the women harvesting

the salt: “dressed in black, / the color of crows, the color of shadows” (52). In “Body Bags,” blackness takes the form of “a murder of crows,” looking down on American soldiers who have just killed a group of Iraqi men. More often, the poems in *Here, Bullet* engage a subtler interplay of light and shadow. In “Alhazen of Basra,” the speaker imagines the 10th-century physicist asleep among books “about sunsets, shadows, and light itself”; he would like to ask Alhazen about “the light within us,” and about “the deep shadows / daylight brings, how light defines us” (39). Indeed, as these lines suggest, some of the volume’s most striking images of light and shadow reveal the speaker’s preoccupation with self-definition. For instance, in “Easel,” Nathere realizes that the figures on his canvas need shadows to ground them, to give them dimension and definition:

*there are no shadows to hold them down,
no slant and fall of shadow,
light’s counterpoint, the dark processing
of thought. (40)*

Whiteness has no meaning without its counterpoint; identity—including racial identity—is not stable and fixed, but relational and mutually constructed. The innumerable references to light and shadow in *Here, Bullet* enable the “dark processing of thought” that centers on the speaker’s own white American military presence in occupied Iraq.

In “How Bright It Is,” not only is the sun described curiously as “white,” but this white light reveals itself as an inexorable, annihilating force. The soldiers in “How Bright It Is” no longer notice anything but the wreckage and the bodies and the sinister light of the white sun. The poem concludes:

*It will take many nails from the coffinmakers
to shut out this light, which reflects off everything:
the calloused feet of the dead, their bony hands,
their pale foreheads so cold, brilliant in the sun. (35)*

Questions that the soldier-speaker never asks are implied throughout the light/dark imagery of Turner’s poems. What am I doing here? How do I make meaning of my role in this violence? What becomes of Iraqi people now? The unutterable (and unanswerable) questions lurk in Turner’s impressionistic juxtapositions of light and shadow, most chillingly present in the subtext of the poem “Observation Post #71.” The poem opens with calm and tranquil observations of nature, and goes on to make the apparently innocent and uncontroversial statement: “Each life has its moment.” However, this observation acquires an ominous aspect when we return to it after the final stanza:

I have seen him in the shadows.
I have watched him in the circle of light
my rifle brings to me. His song
hums in the wings of sand flies.
My mind has become very clear. (12)

The speaker's preoccupation with the relational nature of identity manifests itself in the familiar light/shadow imagery. But the unusual occurrence of the first-person pronoun is made more emphatic by its recurrent positioning: four of the five lines begin with "I" or "my," forcing us to focus on the identity of the speaker. Yet this sharply defined self and crystal-clear consciousness belong to a man who is about to kill another man. In this moment, nothing else defines him.

The speaker's anxiety about self-identity reveals itself most strikingly in "Body Bags." With startling empathy, the speaker imagines how he must appear to the Iraqi men whom he and his fellow American soldiers have just killed. He pictures them rolling over to "question us / about the blood drying on their scalps, / the bullets lodged in the back of their skulls" (14). Resurrecting the men in words, the speaker imagines them wondering about the flies buzzing around them, and about "who these strangers are / who would kick their hard feet, saying / *Last call, motherfucker. Last call.*" Eschewing direct introspection, the speaker's gaze is turned inward upon himself only by way of the imagined gaze of the dead Iraqi men. Identity is constructed relationally here to the degree that the speaker becomes who he imagines himself to be in the perception of these men. The unaskable question resounds between the lines: who am I if I am not a brutalized soldier, a mere embodiment of the hegemonic power of whiteness and Americanness, occupying Iraq?

Since the soldier-speaker cannot afford to confront these introspective questions openly, he relies heavily on a surreal identity.⁵ Dreams abound in this volume, as in the three-poem sequence titled "Dreams from the Malaria Pills." Together, these poems recount the collective dreaming of three American soldiers in Iraq: Barefoot, Bosch, and Turner himself. Barefoot's dream ends with the 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun telling him:

*You carry the pearls of war within you, bombs
swallowed whole and saved for later.
Give them to your children. Give them to your love. (31)*

Ibn Khaldun affirms what the speaker of *Here, Bullet* dare not acknowledge to himself: that what he is doing in Iraq represents an irreversible course, with timeless consequences for himself and subsequent generations of Americans, let alone Iraqis. In Bosch's version of the dream, the self-annihilation is immediate and personal. He literally shaves off the outward sign of his identity, his skin: "peeling

in strips like a rind of fruit, / the skin of a peach” (34). Whereas most poems blur white American subjectivity, here Bosch’s eyes are described as “focused, unfazed,” as he “Sees himself reflected in the mirror, / an image of infinity.” He confronts his image in the mirror and systematically sets fire to himself:

Bosch soaks his forearms in lighter-fluid,
flares a match head and sets his skin on fire.
He repeats this to his thighs and calves.
He burns his chest like a savanna.
By morning, even his head is on fire. (34)

Bosch’s dream provides an extreme example of the desire for self-erasure on the part of a white American soldier. And the ritualistic manner in which Bosch destroys himself suggests not just suicide but self-immolation, with its connotations of self-sacrifice and redemption. Finally, Turner’s own version of dreams from the malaria pills represents an attempted escape into a former identity, a self that can lose itself swimming in the California coast, “as if he’s disentangled / from thought itself” (46). But as the poem progresses, Turner—who refers to himself in the third person—cannot shake off the knowledge of bombs and human limbs washed up on the beach. The poem ends with a pointed reference to the albatross flying “reconnaissance over the waves, / searching for a route home.” No matter how emphatically Turner tries to erase self-consciousness of his own subjectivity, his role in the violence in Iraq haunts him, and, like Coleridge’s ancient mariner, he must keep telling the self-incriminating story eternally.

The speaker of *Here, Bullet* simultaneously desires self-erasure and fears it. The desire finds relatively straightforward expression in the death-wish of poems such as “Repatriation Day” and “For Vultures: A Dystopia.” But more often, the reader detects a subtler tension between the desire and fear of self-erasure, represented by the surreal presence of ghosts that haunt Turner’s poems. Some of these ghosts are Iraqis, others are American soldiers, left lost and wandering, far away from home. But most striking are the speaker’s references to himself as a ghost, even though he is alive. In “Observation Post #798,” discussed earlier, the speaker gazes on the prostitute like a ghost trying to feel his humanity again. “Mihrab” focuses on a fabled Garden of Eden, of which nothing remains but “a ghost of beauty lingering in the shadow’s fall” (51). In this surreal setting, the speaker again dons the identity of a ghost, in order to articulate his experiences in this fallen Eden:

... if there is a definition
in the absence of light,
and if a ghost can wander amazed
through the days of its life, then it is me (51)

The interplay of light and shadow, and the ghostliness of the speaker come together here to emphasize the speaker's own sense of lacking self-definition. But in the setting of occupied Iraq, a defined subjectivity for the speaker can only mean a representative military whiteness. Hence the speaker's blurring of his own subjectivity throughout the volume.

The care that Turner took in editing the cover photograph reflects the degree to which the poetic self is consciously constructed, even when it aims for self-erasure. In an interview with Patrick Hicks, Turner tells us: "In the original photo I'm much bigger but they had to minimize me so that I could be an anonymous soldier, and then they did this watercolor effect to make it even more so. I wanted to take the focus away from me and move it towards just being a soldier" (Turner, "A Conversation"). Notably, the context for this soldier's identity is also carefully constructed. Pointing to the tire marks in the cover photograph, Turner reveals that in the original photograph the unit's Stryker was positioned behind him, and that he "struggled with" the presence of three Iraqi prisoners between him and the photographer:

They were on their knees, their hands were flexcuffed behind their backs, and they had sandbags over their heads. Jackowski, he was my M203 gunner, he took the photo. The prisoner on Jackowski's right had a leather jacket on and we'd written RPG across his back because he'd fired a Rocket Propelled Grenade. In fact, Jackowski was in the center of a circle of prisoners—about ten or thirteen of them—and the stance that I have in that photo looks sort of like John Wayne. That photo looks like "I came over here to chew bubblegum and kick ass, and I'm all out of bubblegum," as they say in the movies. It just wasn't right for a cover photo, especially with the sandbags over the heads because that's now synonymous with torture. (Turner, "A Conversation")

Turner's edits of the original photograph demonstrate his desire to distance himself from his hierarchical positioning as an American sergeant and team leader in Iraq. Whatever the demands of his position in that place and time, Turner does not see the original photograph as harmonizing with his self-image. Tellingly, what he perceives in his own stance is a John Wayne character—a cultural icon of self-congratulatory, colonizing violence that springs from deeply racist and masculinist assumptions. But Turner's self-alienation results not from the image of himself as a uniformed soldier on Iraqi land *per se*, but from the human context in which that image occurs; it is the visual proximity of the captured, handcuffed, and hooded Iraqi men that renders the white American soldier a John Wayne character. In short, Turner's sense of the relational quality of identity, evident in his speaker, also manifests itself in his edits of the original cover photograph.

One might argue that when it comes to power relations in the context of military invasion and occupation, the whiteness of a white American soldier is irrelevant. Certainly, military subjectivity in itself wields power. When Turner commented that it was hard to have a casual exchange with Iraqi citizens while he carried a gun, he was acknowledging that his military subjectivity obliterated his individuality and cast him instead as an abstract and threatening power. To this extent, all American soldiers in Iraq, regardless of their racial and sexual positionings, represent a powerful threat. Yusef Komunyakaa's poems attest to the power he wielded as an African American soldier in Vietnam. And while gender represents an important qualifier of identity, Lynndie England's lurid sexual humiliations of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib demonstrate that military subjectivity can override traditional gender hierarchies. That said, in armed conflicts where racial difference is salient, the most powerful face of military subjectivity is not only male but white. While it is important to qualify whiteness by gender, class, sexual orientation, and other contexts in order not to essentialize, it is also imperative to recognize that much of the power of whiteness comes from its very ability to transcend these specificities. Whiteness as a colonial or neocolonial power on any continent, within domestic boundaries and in global contexts, uniformed or not, has often operated as terror in relation to other racial groups. In the segregated neighborhood of her childhood, bell hooks recalls that "black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing" (hooks 44). She argues that these memories are not essentially different from her present day experiences of whiteness as terror, for example in interactions with officials at U.S. and European airports; hooks' observations about whiteness in the black imagination may be extended to include the perceptions of most people of color, locally and globally, who experience whiteness as terror, often in the context of neoimperialist economic domination. Sharon Paradiso, in a more recent discussion of whiteness in Faulkner's works, suggests that "Terror is, in many ways, the mechanism by which whiteness both asserts and enforces its power" (Paradiso 23). Her analysis of white terror includes what she calls "economic terrorism," and "a terrorization of narrative"—or the white appropriation of black stories. While Iraqis are not black, as Arabs they are perceived to be "other" than white and therefore automatically occupy an inferior subject position in the global racial hierarchy.⁶ Indeed, the most telling racist epithet applied to Arabs and Arab Americans alike in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was "sand nigger." Any interaction between Iraqis and white Americans is fraught with a racial imbalance of power, which intensifies manifold when the white American in question is also a male soldier of an occupying force. Thus a photograph that depicts white American soldiers with captured Iraqi

prisoners tells both a war narrative and a racial tale (as well as an embedded sexual tale, since the subjugated other is inevitably feminized). As Paradiso says in her analysis of *Go Down, Moses*: “A lynched body tells a story that has been told many times; the moral of that story is that whiteness wins” (Paradiso 33). In the global context of the Iraq War, the image of a handcuffed and sandbagged Iraqi body similarly conveys the message that whiteness wins.⁷ Given the hegemonic status of whiteness globally, it is not surprising that we find Turner’s poems consistently engaged with the question: how can the most powerful face of whiteness in our times, embodied in a white male American soldier, experience itself as anything other than hegemonic in occupied Iraq?

Writers investigating the human motivations for war and violence underscore two things: first, that violence against a group is possible only after a long process of systematic dehumanization of the group, to the point where it becomes embedded and internalized in the dominant culture; and second, that violence dehumanizes not only the victim but also the perpetrator. Nineteenth-century American slave narratives stress the brutalizing effects of slavery on the masters and mistresses of slaves, while Erich Maria Remarque, Primo Levi, Chris Hedges, and a host of feminist critics have foregrounded a similar point in contexts as varied as World War I, the Holocaust, and more recent wars in El Salvador, Bosnia, Palestine, and Iraq. Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* depicts both the absolute necessity of a soldier learning to function on the level of reflexes, and the inevitability of his being reduced to an automaton in doing so. Even more than automatons, soldiers must become animals whose very survival depends upon the degree to which they resist thought and feeling. The soldier who does not manage to brutalize himself destroys himself, sometimes at his own hands, as in Turner’s “Eulogy” for Private Miller, who “pulls the trigger / to take brass and fire into his mouth” (20). The challenge for the soldier-speaker in *Here, Bullet* is to guard against a similar self-destruction without succumbing to another kind of annihilation, one that would render him nothing but an embodied whiteness, and a brutalized whiteness at that.

The challenge is a vital one for Turner, who recognizes the relational nature of identity—specifically, that his own sense of self depends upon individualizing the oppositional other, and vice versa. We find direct evidence of this consciousness in diverse interviews in which Turner articulates his belief that we must make an effort to know the not-Me, and that such knowledge defines us. For instance, in an online Q&A with *Washington Post*, he declared with uncharacteristic severity: “I think it’s a decadent society that can bury so many in the earth and displace so many from their homes and yet know relatively nothing about them” (Turner, Online). Time

and again, Turner has articulated not just his knowledge of, but his great admiration for, Iraq as a cradle of human civilization, for Iraqi poets, philosophers, and mathematicians. Nor is his curiosity restricted to ancient Iraq. As Dana Goodyear says in an early review of *Here, Bullet* for *The New Yorker*, “The only book of poems that Turner brought with him to Iraq was called *Iraqi Poetry Today*” (Goodyear). Turner tells Patrick Hicks that he had wanted a particular painting by an Iraqi artist as the cover of his book, though that did not prove possible. He has also expressed his belief that with knowledge and empathy, we can build bridges, and he admires Vietnam veterans Bruce Weigl, Doug Anderson, and John Balaban for doing so. In the Q&A with *Washington Post*, he articulates his hope that *Here, Bullet* will be translated into Arabic: “I’ve had a review of my book done in an Egyptian magazine, and that was received very well. I’m hoping the overall book will be translated into Arabic and that a discussion may begin between myself and those in the Arabic-speaking world. We need to build bridges, and poetry is oftentimes a good material to build with, I think” (Turner, Online). Turner’s bridge-building is well under way: as the editor’s note to the Egyptian review tells us, reviewer and poet Yahia Lababidi spearheaded the project of translating *Here, Bullet* into Arabic precisely because he recognized “how heartening such a perspective would be to an Arab audience.” Significantly, Lababidi’s review also underscores the interdependence of American and Iraqi identities: “Humanizing the ‘enemy’ is at once Turner’s greatest feat and a testament to his own profound humanity” (Lababidi 2008).

In light of Turner’s expressed ideal of empathy and connectivity with Iraqis, it is not surprising that, in an exchange with Edward Guthmann of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he chose to share one particular war memory of Mosul. In Guthmann’s account:

He remembers running through the rubble of a Mosul police station after 16 Iraqi police officers were killed, and says he’ll never forget the face of the 12-year-old boy who shouted, “Let free my father, my father no bad man!” as he took the boy’s father prisoner and drove away with him.

“That kid will always remember my face,” says Turner, who is working on a poem about the incident. “Even if we never meet again in our life, he has my face as the image of who took his father from him.”

In the midst of the chaos and horror of multiple violent deaths, Turner is struck by the implications of the boy’s plea, which, in casting his father as an innocent victim, points an accusatory finger at Turner as the “bad man” instead. The relational quality of the soldier’s identity is obvious here, and Turner’s sensitivity to it finds expression in the mirror images he uses to articulate the memory: just as he will never forget the

face of the boy, his own face will always remain in the boy's memory as representative of powerful bad men—white American military men—who snatch fathers away from their young sons. As Turner recognizes in an early interview with his publisher Alice James Books, the mutuality of his experience in Iraq also has national dimensions: “It may take years for me to understand some of the deeper ramifications of what happened and why it happened. I have a feeling that the same can be said of America, as well. That is, what does this war mean to our national consciousness? How does it change and add to the idea of America? Of Iraq?” (Turner, Interview). National identities, like personal identities, are mutually constructed; one shapes and forms the other, especially when war serves as the crucible.

In Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*, the speaker finds ways of minimizing his white military subjectivity in order to preserve his own individuality. Given the interdependence and co-construction of identities, this sense of his own humanity depends upon his acknowledgement of the humanity of the Iraqi people around him. Turner meets the representational challenges of first-hand war poetry through his emphasis on narrative descriptions, his focus on natural objects and mundane particularities, juxtaposed with references to ancient Iraqi culture, and through the surrealism of his imagery. Together, these poetic strategies enable him to process and articulate his experiences in Iraq without succumbing to the paradoxically empowering and obliterating effects of his own uniformed whiteness in occupied Iraq. In the process, Turner gives space to a multiplicity of “observation posts” that decenter the lyric consciousness and enable the reader's empathy with a now imaginable Other. *Here, Bullet* responds to questions of poetry's relevance in wartime by engaging our deepest imaginative resources and demonstrating that our aesthetic engagement is also an ethical engagement with the ideal of human connectivity that war would obliterate.

Notes

¹ Brian Turner visited my Contemporary War Narratives class at California State University, Fresno, on February 27, 2008.

² I will refer to “speaker” in the singular, by way of denoting the characteristic voice that dominates the volume.

³ Vicente Gotera's assertion that Komunyakaa's blackness has no bearing on his Vietnam War poetry has been productively challenged by Kevin Stein (1995), Angela Salas (2003), and Michael Dowdy (2005).

⁴ I discuss the political implications of this aesthetic in my essay “Naomi Shihab Nye's Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime,” forthcoming in a June 2010 special issue of *MELUS*.

⁵ Komunyakaa's poems are also frequently described as employing surrealist images. Numerous poems in *Dien Cai Dau* mention ghosts and shadows. But while they articulate the speaker's sense of his own insubstantiality—a well-known example would be "Facing It"—they do not suggest the same kind of self-representational dilemma vis-à-vis a darker Other that I identify in Turner's poetry.

⁶ Historically, Arab Americans were cast as "white." But as Ignatiev, Roediger, Lopez, Babb, and others have pointed out, whiteness represents a fluid and unstable category whose parameters shift with political, economic, and national imperatives. Thus the whitening of Italians, Irish, and Jews, and, more recently, of Eastern Europeans. I would argue that there has been a parallel process of de-whitening of Arabs in the years since 9/11. Arab Americans, too, increasingly see themselves as "other" than white.

⁷ See Appendix for a fuller explication of whiteness theory.

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