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**Beyond Appropriation:**

**Arab, Coptic American, and Persian Subjectivities in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*,  
Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, and Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue***

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION has been the mainstay of multi-ethnic fiction, producing stories that adapt and testify to the experiences of the author, mining national events and encounters for narratives that record individual ambivalence and resistance to a larger imperialistic body. Postcolonial literature has been the archetype for this autobiographical lens across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recording what Mary Louise Pratt terms as a literature that “colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms” (7). Pratt’s definition, however, needs to be broadened for our contemporary literary climate. This corrective is necessary because US veteran fiction about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq often recounts and translates veterans’ wartime experiences in ways that mirror Pratt’s definition. White US military veteran authors such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, and Elliot Ackerman have deepened their engagement with the colonized subject, utilizing transgressive narrative strategies by placing Arab, Coptic American, and Persian narration at the forefront of their texts. In doing so, these authors contest their own autobiographical privilege and reveal the limited exposure that native audiences have with Arab, Coptic American, and Persian subjectivity, reframing their narrative perspectives around people doubly conscious of their limits during the US military occupation. Turner’s poetry collection *Here, Bullet* (2005), Klay’s short story “Psychological Operations” from his collection *Redeployment* (2014), and Ackerman’s novel *Green on Blue* (2015) offer a range of subject positions about the Afghanistan and Iraq wars across multiple forms of prose and poetry.

The movement from post-9/11 literature to veteran U.S. war literature has been a recent shift. As American post-9/11 literature encapsulated the immediate emotional upheaval felt by the public after the attack, literary texts began to chronicle the national and psychological trauma experienced by 9/11 survivors. Works such as Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005),

and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) epitomize this narrative approach, situating their characters' actions within the pre- and post-9/11 era and using the terrorist attack to signal the epochal shift in the nation's temperament. Starting in 2007, post-9/11 American fiction expands outward, expressing dissatisfaction with the earlier representation of U.S. victimhood and focuses not just on its own governmental policies and activities that precipitated 9/11, but also on more fully representing the cultural Other. Texts as varied as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and John Updike's *Terrorist* (2007) record the radical extremism endemic in fictional as well as historical figures, including *Falling Man*'s representation of Mohamed Atta, who flew American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Arab American writings such as Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009), and Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2013) also emerged to challenge the Islamophobia and prejudice leveled at Arab Americans in the wake of 9/11. Still, American discourse has largely gravitated back to the literature of white America contemplating the plight for all, and this reversion to the old order has escalated since 2012. Yet Maureen Ryan rightly notes that "The narratives of America's most recent wars include unprecedented observation of, and often unusual respect for, the local nationals (allies and enemies, civilians and combatants) who are thrust into the conflict" (18). This engagement with the subject position of the Other has become a fundamental aspect of US literature written by recent war veterans. As literature by US war veterans has begun to be published, contemporary literature has embraced the movement from post-9/11 culture to more holistically considering the weight, and human cost, of the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, so that writings by US war veterans now make up a key corpus of inquiry, one that has not been studied sufficiently.

Scholars including Margaret Scanlan have pushed for greater inclusion of minority perspectives on 9/11, holding to the belief that an exposure to a plurality of cultural viewpoints will better reveal the effects that 9/11 has had across ethnic and national boundaries (267). However, Aaron DeRosa counsels against essentializing that prerogative, warning that to "privilege ordinary Muslim or Arab narratives as the right, and in some cases only, path for representing 9/11 alterity elide[s] the multitude of voices that rise from the ashes and flatten[s] 9/11 to a single issue" (162). In this light, Turner's, Klay's, and Ackerman's texts work as valuable counter-narratives. Their texts contest their authors' own function within the US military industrial complex and record alternate routes for Arab, Coptic American, and Persian

subjectivity, refusing to represent the Othered subject without an embodied context. Similarly, in her critical study *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (2014), Carol Fadda-Conrey writes that “the criteria for determining whether texts can be considered Arab-American should remain as flexible as possible to avoid replicating the exclusionary methods that have and continue to relegate minority voices to the peripheries of US literatures and cultures” (24). Similar to how Fadda-Conrey denies the obloquy of appropriation, I aim to illuminate how white US veterans imagine the inner lives of Iraqis and Afghans, taking the flexibility that Fadda-Conrey offers critics and examining Arabs, Coptic Americans, and Persians as subjects for cultural production, subjects that enable the authors to resist their own complicity with the forms of colonizing discourse.

Because Arab American studies is still an emergent field and not as codified as Asian American studies, I want to lift some of the terminology surrounding recent controversies from the latter and apply it to Arab American studies. This digression is important since Asian American studies, itself as a discipline, has recently dealt with issues of appropriation and insider and outsider divides. For example, after the 2008 Association of Asian American Studies prize for best Asian American fiction went to a white author, James Janko, at the annual conference, Asian American literary scholar Jennifer Ho writes how she posed self-critical questions to herself: “Which bodies matter more when trying to define Asian American literature: the bodies of the writers who create the material or the bodies of the characters who populate the fiction?” (206). Ho ultimately argues that Asian American studies, and, by extension, other multiethnic paradigms, must not advocate for an essentialist position, a belief that is mirrored in Fadda-Conrey’s position above. I do not seek to further marginalize, silence, or whitewash the valuable literature brought forward by Arab American writers such as Halaby, Abdullah, or Akhtar, but, at present, there is a lack of Arab American war veterans offering their experiences in literary form. As a result, I want to study how white US veterans conceptualize the boundaries and borders of Arab, Coptic American, and Persian authenticity. Turner, Klay, and Ackerman’s narrative strategies deconstruct the colonizing stigma of nationalism and thus pivot onto concepts of difference as necessary lenses for thinking about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from a global perspective and not just a “white” perspective. A critical corollary to their strategy is that their texts prioritize difference and distinction, impressing more interiority upon the Arab, Coptic American, and Persian populations who

often appear in other American literatures as unindividuated and function as potential threats rather than as rich and multidimensional characters.

The privileging of the Arab, Coptic American, and Persian disarms uniform aspects of the US military industrial complex. In the arena of US imperial occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq, white war veterans' adoption of these Othered viewpoints allow them a narrative perspective through which they can question their own complicity in military operations. Reading against the grain, Gregory Jay and Sandra Elaine Jones position discourses of whiteness as a critical paradigm that "thinks critically about how white skin preference has operated systematically, structurally, and sometimes unconsciously as a dominant force in American—and indeed in global—society and culture" (100). In this light, literature that stages racial passing and subverts autobiography, such as *Here, Bullet*, "Psychological Operations," and *Green on Blue*, reframes the subject position as one against the very dominant forces that the authors embody.

Brian Turner has published two poetry collections, *Here, Bullet* and the subsequent *Phantom Noise* (2010), as well as the memoir *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014). Across his work, he traces the physical and psychological damage wrought against American soldiers and Iraqi civilians, but also Iraqi insurgents. Turner served a year as infantry team leader of the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, in Iraq, and scholars of Turner's poetry have wielded two contradictory opinions, holding to the hegemonic privilege that underscores Turner's whiteness, but also highlighting how Turner's work seeks to camouflage that fact by concentrating on the narratives and customs of everyday Iraqi civilians. For example, studying how Turner's poetry displaces the military and national advantages embodied in his racialized whiteness, Samina Najmi argues that Turner's work also "brings into focus the gestures, thoughts, and implied histories of ordinary individuals living in Iraq" (62). While the majority of Turner's poems in his debut collection catalogue experiences from the anonymous U.S. poet-speaker-cum-soldier, Turner strategically highlights perspectives of multiple Iraqi subjectivities. This authorial maneuver allows him to undo a simplistic persona of the Other and enables him to create a more complex, and empathetic, worldview of the colonized subjects occupied by US military forces. By voicing the Iraqi civilian experiences, Turner engages with and reveals Arab subjectivity in a capacity that he, within his prescribed role of US armed soldier, cannot replicate except through an imaginative lens (Najmi 63). In doing so, Turner combats the "poet as war tourist" mindset that a narrow reading of his poem

“Ferris Wheel” can suggest (Deer 325), where Iraqi innocents are dredged up from the Tigris rather than the Iraqi policemen that are sought, implying the endless sense of loss suffered by both the war and unrelated, quotidian conflicts.

Turner’s employs quotations from the Qur’an and Arab writers such as Muhammad Al-Jawahiri, Fadhil Al-Azzawi, and Abdul Al-Ma’arri to highlight the legitimacy of his interest in Arab culture. While his early poem “In the Leupold Scope” presents the US speaker scanning the city with his rifle scope and finding an Iraqi woman “dressing the dead” (line 7), that poem does not show her interiority. Turner’s next poem, however, satisfies the requirement of subjectivity. In “The Al Harishma Weapons Market,” the speaker is a native Iraqi, Akbar, a weapons dealer who lovingly cares for his four-year-old son, Habib. He is neither fervently ideological nor stridently militaristic, but simply pragmatic, knowing that his continued sale of these weapons to the indiscriminate purchasers gives him the income to provide for his son. Akbar looks upon his profession with cold rationality, holding to the justification that “Black marketer or insurgent— / an American death puts food on the table, / more cash than most men earn in an entire year” (lines 9-11). Akbar reflects upon his significance through his partaking in a national market value on US infantry. While he does not directly participate in the murder of US military, he links his sales with the monetized pursuit of Iraqi insurgents and extremist snipers. Catherine Irwin highlights this reality by noting that “The speaker’s representation of Akbar points to ways that the labor of war turns subjectivity into a precarious proposition, as Akbar’s way of life holds out the promise of a monetary reward and the good life in exchange for an American body” (107). Akbar’s consideration, although small, reflects an understanding of how his business contributes to the large-scale devastation that is being waged across his country.

Turner’s speaker, then, internalizes how his operation extends outward and impacts a variety of separatist, terrorist, and national interests. Despite his rationality, he comprehends that his sale of weapons expands beyond constructed notions of the enemy. The poem’s next lines note that “He won’t let himself think of his childhood friends— / those who wear the blue uniforms / which bring death, dying from barrels / he may have oiled in his own hands” (lines 12-15). Akbar transitions from a contemplative acquiescence regarding US mortality to suppressing the reality that his weapons perform equal disfiguration and battery on Iraqi servicemen. His complicity with the reign of violence executed against the US occupation of Iraq, then, erupts into equal complicity with the violence enacted against his own people.

Akbar, as the poem suggests, “won’t let himself think of his childhood friends,” but his assertion is interrupted by the three succeeding lines which flesh out all of the appalling realities that await those comrades who are working as US allies. Iraq’s partnership with the US military starts the disintegration of easy alliances and coalitions for men such as Akbar and all those who seek to believe that their weapons are waging war against one imperial enemy and not their own countrymen. As a result, Akbar recognizes that the US colonizing subject is not the sole body being ravaged in this war.

Against this realization, Akbar struggles for reconciliation and peace-making, even though he can only enact these qualities within his narrow home space. Operating as a weapons dealer, he cannot do anything other than try to make his home environment safe from the violence around him, and “Late at night / when gunfire frightens them both, / Habib cries for his father, who tells him / *It’s just the drums, a new music*” (lines 19-22). Akbar reconceptualizes war to his son, transforming the cacophonous discharge of munitions into a song, with the musical metaphor of drums serving as a reference to an earlier moment in the poem where, “like a musician / swaddling a silver-plated trumpet, / Akbar wraps an AK-47 in cloth” (lines 4-6). In this second instance, though, the aural damage cannot be displaced through poetic language, even if Akbar is clearly trying to instill calm in his son. Further, the italics testify to the human voice of Akbar, moving him from alien Arab-Other to subjective—and thus empathetic—speaker. Caught in an unceasing battleground, where tribal and national conflicts rage outside, Akbar is cognizant that the effects of his business bleed into the home aurally, if not yet physically. Thus, while he misrepresents the outside gunfire as music to Habib, the threat of arbitrary bloodshed unfolds and wraps around his family. In this moment, Akbar understands that he cannot divorce his business from the apparatus of US resistance.

Turner’s poem “2000 lbs.” is his most comprehensive study of multiple Arab subjectivities. Across eight stanzas, this poem narrates a variety of perspectives in an Iraqi city street the moment before an Islamist suicide bomber detonates himself as a US convoy vehicle drives up alongside him. Turner unmask a history of the Iraqi people, concentrating on those who want nothing more than to live their quiet lives in the midst of this extraordinary struggle. While the first stanza offers the exterior panic of the terrorist as he prepares for his sacrifice, “2000 lbs.” transitions into a eulogy for the civilians sacrificed in the wake of the terrorist attack. Turner’s second stanza begins in the headspace of Sefwan, who laments a failed romance with one Shatha three decades earlier:

and although it was decades, he still loves her,  
remembers her standing at the canebrake  
where the buffalo cooled shoulder-deep in the water,  
pleased with the orange cups of flowers he brought her,  
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, shrapnel  
traveling at the speed of sound to open him up  
in blood and shock, a man whose last thoughts  
are of love and wreckage, with no one there  
to whisper him gone. (lines 13-23)

Sefwan considers the past to be recoverable only through nostalgic yearning. This sense is especially evident in Sefwan's concentrated rhetoric of florid romance, all of which are anchored by symbols of harvest; the past thus becomes a harvest that is unburdened by contemporary US military occupation and insurgent terrorism. While the speaker's tone remains one of regret, that sense of lamentation is bound by relational failings, not by violence or Islamist forces. Sefwan's sense of loss and degeneration is further determined by the cesura closing out the internal rhyme, "the years slip by, light as grain, bright" (line 18). This momentary pause between light and bright fragments first in positive ways, highlighted by the calm that Sefwan considers preceding it, before destructively unspooling with a record of the collateral done to the physical body. Turner's poem repeats this juxtaposition time and again, capturing the daily experiences in the townspeople's and US convoy's lives before they are ravaged by indiscriminate violence. Turner's access into Iraqi interiority becomes an incantation witnessing to the degradation done by insurgents to Iraqi victims.

Moving from Iraqi victims to US victims of terrorism, the third stanza of "2000 lbs." assembles around Sgt. Ledoux of the National Guard just before he is thrown from his convoy. Turner's delay in introducing a US speaker-subject places a subject position first on those Iraqis who have come before, including Sefwan, so that the country's collective suffering occurs before a US occupant's suffering. Sgt. Ledoux, before succumbing to his fatal injuries, feels "a woman's hand touching his face, tenderly / the way his wife might, amazed to find /

a wedding ring on his crushed hand” (lines 43-5). This stanza goes beyond divisions between US and Iraq precisely because it conflates the intimate touch of an implicitly American wife with that of an Iraqi civilian, breaking away from compartmentalized studies of both nation and nationalism. Nationhood thus becomes unfixed and fluid, so that this image of reassurance blends together bodies of each people. Situating Turner’s poetry alongside twentieth-century Iraqi poetry, Mara Naaman considers the difficult politics, and poetics, of war veterans who record the “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” (366). In poems such as this one, Turner resists his own ideological underpinning and forms a sense of belonging to his temporary home, constituting Iraqi perspectives as the narrative axis of his literary works.

Turner’s fourth and fifth stanzas repeat this narrative design, swinging between poetic breakdowns of the bodies of both Iraqi civilians and American soldiers. The fourth stanza contemplates how Rasheed and Sefa, the latter whose name can mean purity in Arabic, are thrown off of their bicycles and die beside a bridal shop, gazing upon shop mannequins of husbands and wives that they themselves will never become (58-64). The fifth stanza contemplates civil affairs officer Lt. Jackson, who is blowing bubbles out of a Humvee window when the blast obliterates his hands, so that his final memory is of watching the bubbles float

like the oxygen trails of deep ocean divers,  
something for the children, something beautiful,  
translucent globes with their iridescent skins  
drifting on vehicle exhaust and the breeze  
that might lift one day over the Zagros mountains,  
that kind of hope, small globes which may have  
astonished someone on the sidewalk (lines 73-9)

Each of these stanzas frames the Iraqi civilians and the American soldiers as victims sacrificed in the name of terror. They are each equally humanized, with “2000 lbs.” recording the histories and stories now forever silenced. Lt. Jackson, while a member of the US army, is merely a liaison between the US military and Iraqi authorities; his purpose that day was not to police the city streets but rather to delight Iraqi children. In doing so, Turner documents the

indiscriminate nature of suicide bombers who pursue soft targets and disregard the rampant destruction inflicted upon their own populations.

The sixth stanza concentrates on an old Iraqi beggar who loses her grandson in the bomb blast. Although Turner offers little in the way of her specific past experiences, the poem's speaker acknowledges that she has lived through Iraq's decade of economic prosperity in the 1970s as well as the contemporary era of national policies that influenced pervasive and structural poverty in many of its people, especially following the US trade embargoes placed on Iraq. In an empirical study, Wafa Abdul Karim Abbas, Najood G. Azar, Linda G. Haddad, and Mary Grace Umlauf determine that the US trade embargoes in the 1990s affected maternal and child health, arguing that "international trade sanction conditions in the 1990s eroded health conditions for maternal and fetal outcomes" (302). The loss of health and economic conditions force women such as this anonymous grandmother into the open, where they serve as victims for violent insurgents. Turner's Iraqi beggar reminisces and reveals that her suffering is constant even if it is difficult to fathom:

If you'd asked her forty years earlier  
if she could see herself an old woman  
begging by the roadside for money, here,  
with a bomb exploding at the market  
among all these people, she'd have said  
*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.* (89-97)

Her denunciation of her present struggle, seeing her family's basic necessities deprived through trade embargoes, weighs heavily in an evocative image of her kissing her grandson, knowing he will not get to live out the life that she had thought he would. Turner's stanza mourns those Iraqis who are arbitrarily sacrificed, but equally grieves over the lost generation of men and women, including this grandson and Rasheed and Sefa from stanza four, who possess little access to the formative schooling and culture that would have been impressed upon earlier generations. Focusing on international social welfare issues, Shereen T. Ismael laments this

lost generation and concludes that “Iraq’s children, the basis of its future, denied any productive education and exposed to daily events of terror and violence, have become vulnerable to drug addiction and sexual abuse, and have generally been conditioned by the social pathologies that have come to make up their desperate lives” (161).

Even as Turner’s poem grapples with the nuances of everyday Arab subjectivity, the seventh stanza reiterates the narrow impression that anchors the terrorist perspective. In many ways, the language here does not yield new depth or insight; however, Turner’s contrast now emphasizes the difference between ordinary Iraqis and the radicalized extremist. The terrorist’s fanatical attempt to strike fear into the hearts is his sole priority and, in that sense, his belief that “he is everywhere, he is of all things, / his touch is the air taken in” (lines 101-2), carries with it the disclosure that the heavy weight of terrorism affixes itself now to this community. His fervor appears to be his only mode of subjectivity, and the panic that he awakens in the crowd is his lasting victory, orchestrating “that sound / the martyr cries filled with the word / his soul is made of, *Inshallah*” (106-8). This reverberating echo, which Turner translates elsewhere in his collection as “*Allah be willing*” in the poem “What Every Soldier Should Know” (line 9), exists to warn the Iraqi townspeople and American infantry that his radicalism knows no bounds. The elderly and the young, Iraqis and Americans, are equal targets in this worldview. In that sense, the poem repeats the moral found in “The Al Harishma Weapons Market.” Innocent blood will be sacrificed merely to reinforce tribal violence.

“2000 lbs.” closes with a deceptively captivating revelation. The eighth stanza positions itself around the collective dead who wander among one another and offer consolation to the living “in their grief, to console / those who cannot accept such random pain, / speaking *habib* softly, one to another there / in the rubble and debris, *habib* / over and over, that it might not be forgotten” (114-118). However, Turner’s poem emphasizes the unity of the dead, and reinforces the overarching thesis that this collective, despite the privileging of the Arabic language, includes victims from both America and Iraq. Consequently, the Arabic word *habib* (love) that the dead whisper time and again reconciles Iraqi civilians and US infantry together.<sup>2</sup> Turner’s speaker thus argues that divisions of nationality matter little when lives are lost. This concentration on Americans and Iraqis both speaking Arabic has yet to be noted in the critical consideration of Turner’s work so far. For example, Samina Najmi rightly reveals that “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” (65). However, no critic mentions the final stanza’s collapsing of national subject positions and does not interpret what the single uttered word, and its language, can signify. Namely that Turner’s privileging of one language, and one overarching thesis of love and belonging, positions the entirety of “2000 lbs.” as a poem concentrated around transnational empathy. Turner’s project of Arab American subjectivity precludes any semblance of an American hegemonic metanarrative from dominating and redirects readers to consider the virtue of exhibiting grace in the midst of horrific violence. These American and Iraqi bodies are working against the pathologies of fear and trauma that wreck lives, whether old or new.

Phil Klay served in the US Marine Corps as a Public Affairs officer stationed in Iraq’s Anbar Province from 2007 to 2008, and, like Turner’s poetry, his short fiction also resists autobiographical privilege. Klay’s National Book Award-winning story collection *Redeployment* (2014), which catalogues a litany of war-time abuses and bureaucratic inefficiencies suffered by everyday soldiers, chaplains, and psychologists, includes a story told from a Coptic American perspective. “Psychological Operations,” the longest story in the collection, concerns Waguih, an Egyptian American Copt attending Amherst College after serving in Iraq, who confesses his sins to Zara Davies, an African American freshman who has newly converted to Islam. While he feigns a veteran indifference to what he perpetrated while on duty, his crimes haunt him. Accompanied by military personnel, he lured Iraqis out into the open by wielding a stream of invectives that were so inhumane, so offensive in their threats against the sanctity of persecuted Iraqi women, that the enemy believed the only response to be a direct assault, which resulted in the immediate death of them and their militia. Waguih is quick to qualify that the military was not so much battling al-Qaeda as they were battling angry Islamists who felt threatened by Western imperialism imposing itself on their land. Waguih’s confession is thus framed around a desire for another to understand and punish him for his transgressions. It is not just another, though, but the cultural other—here the Islamic convert Zara—from whom Waguih seeks empathy. In doing so, Waguih reveals an ideology wary of trusting American exceptionalism to comprehend the misgivings he has over his mission. Indeed, in many ways, Waguih exists at the intersection between individuality and conformity; he questions how he can stand apart from his cultural upbringing as a Copt, but he also perpetrates violence in a quest to please his father.

Klay's story is about the fundamental disconnect between the daily horrors of US soldiers' lived experience and US civilians' need for retaliation after the terrorist attack on 9/11. Having finished his military service, Waguih attends Amherst College and takes a course entitled Punishment, Politics, and Culture. As he sardonically notes, "The course description read, 'Other than war, punishment is the most dramatic manifestation of state power,' and since thirteen months in Iraq had left me well acquainted with war, I figured I'd go learn about punishment" (169). This class exposes him to Zara. She is the only individual on campus who, rather than deferring to the implicit righteousness of, and thus gratitude for, his military service, openly challenges the structural logic of the US's military intervention in Iraq. Unlike others in Waguih's sphere of influence, which is later revealed to include Waguih's estranged father, she is aghast at the destruction perpetrated by the US in the name of eliminating another branch of the Axis of evil. Zara is a figure of resistance, one who voices, like Klay's narrator, a skepticism over the politics that led to a populace comfortable with military retribution on nation states who did not participate directly in the 9/11 attack. The individual actors of the US military seldom faced any reprisal for the devastation they caused, no matter the illegality of their actions, and this reality anchors Waguih's self-loathing and bitter stance toward systemic and state-sanctioned violence.

Legacies of violence haunt Waguih's memory, which emphasizes the history of Muslims' persecution of the Copts (Ibrahim 4-6), even if his story only briefly references it. While Zara sees him as a minority ally amidst the sea of uniformly disinterested, white Americans at college amidst the interminable War on Terror, Waguih is quick to dismiss her linking the two of them: "Muslims hate us [...] There are riots, sometimes. Like the pogroms in Russia against Jews" (173). Waguih gives voice to the Coptic people's historical abuse in Egypt and the Middle East. He also uses his knowledge of religious victimization and tribal violence to prevent Zara from identifying with his suffering. Thus, even as she reveals how she has been "thinking more and more about Iraq. Specifically, about American exceptionalism and the fate of the *Ummah* and the unbelievable numbers of Iraqis getting killed, numbers too large to be conceptualized and that nobody seemed to care about" (172), Waguih divests himself of any need to express intercultural empathy. He remains impertinent even as he internalizes Zara's fears about how to conceptualize the damage wrought from the US's occupation of Iraq. As a result, early on Waguih privileges bureaucracy over any attempt to bear witness to an honest introspection of how persecution exists on all sides.

As “Psychological Operations” continues, Klay’s story reveals Waguih’s internal conflict and uncertainty about his place in America’s national ideology. For example, after being reported to a university administrative official for the potential use of hate speech against Zara, Waguih positions himself and his time in Iraq with a typically underhanded critique. He explains that he “helped as I could. I did what’s right. Right by America, anyway” (177). With this qualifying clause, Waguih, and by extension Klay, subverts America’s exceptionalist thinking and reclaims a more nuanced and understated approach to the everyday violence in America’s 2007 surge in Iraq. The country’s political strategists doubled down on the righteousness of the surge, arguing that it would implement order and stability in the country, but Waguih remains skeptical about these contentions. He cannot subscribe to the moral deficiency that allowed for actions such as those that he himself engaged in, where he faces no military or judicial oversight, or worse, reprimand. Waguih’s overt confession to Zara, who is herself a symbolic reflection of the Iraqi victims that he preyed upon, exposes a need to be listened to and then punished.

Later, Waguih privately confesses to Zara and reveals how his childhood was predicated on experiences of American fundamentalist abuse and neoliberal sympathy, twin apparatuses that equally corrupt his individuality. As he relates, after 9/11 he refused to enter into righteous battle over cultural honor after a high school classmate in Virginia labeled him a “sand nigger” (192). This initial insult does not trigger Waguih’s indignation so much as it does his father’s belligerence upon learning that his son did nothing to contest the verbal abuse. For Waguih’s father, submitting to this racist mark and not standing up for his culture shows a deficit of character. As Waguih reflects, his encounter at school “became a big incident, and there was a lot of sympathy for me, because I was Arab, and because of 9/11. And because of what he said. I hated all of it. I don’t like pity” (193). Waguih’s internalized self-hatred recursively informs his decision to join the military. He resists the pity impressed upon him by his community, and the judgment of his father, by adopting a wholly masculine persona and striking out at others. His military tour thus becomes an exercise in transforming psychological analysis into self-destructive rage. Further, in telling Zara, he seeks punishment from an individual, understanding that his country has already absolved itself of responsibility from the reprehensible actions that he orchestrated.

Waguih’s narrative also serves as a reflection of American military forces’ lack of foresight and preparedness for the Iraqi culture. Waguih laments that the Army was not

cognizant about the dialect differences between his Egyptian Arabic and what was spoken in Iraq, noting instead that “My unit thought they’d hit the jackpot. They didn’t even have to send me to language school. I tried to argue that they should” (190). He obsesses over his subjective standing in the unit, questioning the extent to which he is viewed apart from his racial heritage. Waguih’s apprehension is legitimized when he is compartmentalized into being an effective Iraqi translator simply because the outward markers of his appearance—his name, his body—embody the characteristics of the Iraqi people. He exposes the vanity, and the ineffectuality, with which the US assumed that any Egyptian American would be able to navigate the local dialects in Iraq. Waguih ultimately engages Zara with his memories in order to reconstitute his belief in justice, which has been nullified by his peers, with a principled observer from the same “cultural” standing.

Klay’s story thus undercuts masculine tropes of identity and exposes all the ways in which whiteness is structurally part of the US vernacular. Waguih’s father turns toward ritualistic observance of the US military industrial complex, becoming “Mister Über-America. He had flags flying at our house, and ‘Support Our Troops’ magnets all over the bumper of his car. Not that that changed anything, the way he looked. Or the way we all looked, and with our Arab-sounding names, going through airport security” (195). Despite Waguih’s father’s efforts to position himself within the apparatus of American patriotism, his body’s racial encoding belies any sense of national trust. No matter how stridently a Copt American attempts to conform to the political consensus of the era, Klay’s story articulates how the father’s physical appearance retains the markers that justify his continued marginalization and prohibition from the unanimity. Nonetheless, he accepts his ostracized status as an Egyptian American. Further, he wants retaliation waged after 9/11, even if the military intelligence has no evidence of the new military target, Iraq, coordinating the attack. He internalizes and projects outward his assimilated, white disregard for distinctions between Arab nations and fuels himself solely through his tribal honor as an American, demanding vengeance.

US counterinsurgency operations fought to gain the approval of the Iraqi civilians, but Waguih demonstrates how this desire to be viewed as something other than a colonizer could be deployed, paradoxically, as a strategic advantage. While soldiers received training on how to respect local customs, they were obligated to do so even at the risk of propping up, and perpetuating, cultures of domestic abuse against women and children. For example, after interviewing US soldiers, Marcus Schulzke highlights how “This neglect for women and

children would be problematic in any context, but it is particularly disconcerting given that America's wars were partly legitimated by appeals to liberate oppressed women and that American policymakers often cite the promotion of women's rights as a core part of democratization" (412). Waguih's mission during the US-led coalition for the Battle of Fallujah is to assist Marines and to apply his psychological knowledge to "increase my unit's lethality" (199). One of the ways he increases his platoon's success rate is to seize on the regularity with which Iraqi militants "treat women like dogs" (208). Waguih is able to prey on the normalization of gender abuse because the US military does not run interference against overt displays of domestic abuse. He appropriates the Islamic notion of feminine virtue and then traffics in its debasement in order to gain an advantage over an Islamist, Laith al-Tawhid, and his militia of insurgents, the al-Tawhid Martyrs Brigade, who have barricaded themselves inside a mosque.

As Waguih tells Zara, he exploited his own limited access to the Iraqi language in order to disrespect Laith al-Tawhid's family and refocus the Islamist's attention away from the superior artillery at the US Marines' disposal. Waguih unleashes a stream of obscenities, taunting the militia leader by acting as though the US counterinsurgency had captured the man's daughters, "Telling him how when his daughters bent down to pray, we'd put our shoes on their heads and rape them in the ass. Rub our foreskins on their faces" (209). These slurs build in degree over an hour and shame Laith al-Tawhid. Thus, in an ironic reversal of Waguih's earlier refusal to contest the verbal abuse he faced in school, al-Tawhid launches himself and his men directly at the Marines and are summarily cut down. Waguih himself did not personally pull the trigger, but he instigated and then escalated his enemy's response by discerning the Arab's cultural convictions. In divulging these events to Zara, Waguih acknowledges that his string of insults resulted in no disciplinary measure. No commanding officer condemned his actions, and the glee of the Marine ground forces is implicit throughout (209). Waguih testifies to these events so that Zara comprehends the bureaucratic approbation of such brutality, revealing his sense of shame for treating the enemy as something less than human, as something that he manipulated to his own ends.

Klay frames "Psychological Operations" as an impassioned plea that America not just wash its hands of the atrocities it perpetrated, like Pontius Pilate, who is referenced earlier in the story (176). Waguih's telling affirms that America must work to assist those burdened with executing its militaristic agenda. He laments the bureaucracy of the political machine, for

“When the war started, almost three hundred congressmen voted for it. And seventy-seven senators. But now, everybody’s washed their hands of it” (206). Despite bad intelligence, the fact remains that US soldiers engineered violence against men who were not al-Qaeda but were insurgents who nonetheless objected to the US occupation. In *Zara*, Waguih sees a sense of belonging that is contrary to the uniformly white congressmen and women who signed off on the Iraq war. Klay’s short story works at one more political level, though. So much of the story revolves around forgiving the transgressor without resorting to violence, orchestrating how, at the most basic level, violence only begets more of the same, and the story resolves itself with a sustained plea for forgiveness. In a transnational context, Klay’s story argues that Americans need to forgive the individual terrorists who have waged destruction on American soil and against American soldiers. Those who stand up for themselves in the name of some abstract honor end up dead, such as Laith al-Tawhid, and those who refuse that first level of ridicule still end up in a moral quagmire, manipulated into actions that result in the death of others as they punish themselves for their transgressions.

Klay’s story concludes with a therapeutic notion of absolution, one that the Pontius Pilate image earlier anticipates. Waguih bears witness to his realization that his words directly instigated others’ deaths and expects, if not desires, some lasting scorn or punishment, yet Zara only “reached over and put her hand on my shoulders, her touch light and warm. Even though her face was calm, my heart was beating and I looked up at her as though she were passing down a sentence” (212). Zara’s shift from censure to empathy is the symbolic movement of enemy to ally. Even though the two operate according to different faiths and different worldviews, Zara recognizes what Waguih needs and extends herself. Her touch resonates because it is not grounded in punishment but, knowing what she now knows, in the forfeiture of all that she could wage against him. Further, Zara’s sentence is itself more perilous since it aspires to a new order, one that does not insist on the old colonizing forms of retribution but instead pursues a new balance, a revolutionary mode of thinking, one of peace.

As the years have passed since America’s entrance into occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, white American soldiers-cum-authors have become more formidable in constructing counter-narratives that resist the American military industrial complex. Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue* performs this commission in new ways. After the appearance of everyday Iraqis in Turner’s poetry, and after the Coptic American perspective of Klay’s “Psychological Operations,” Ackerman’s novel presents the fullest attempt so far to record the expanse of

Persian identity in the wake of American military intervention in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Ackerman completed five tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, and his service reveals itself in the turbulent response that the narrator, orphaned Afghani Aziz Iqbal, displays to insurgents and US allies. Significantly, Aziz comprehends little of the struggle, conceiving instead that the necessity of survival is the only fundamental concern. In a study examining a range of television media for how they present post-9/11 Arab bodies, Evelyn Alsultany lauds the “representational strategies” that included “humanizing Muslims by featuring them as lead characters and depicting the differences among them, showing that Muslims are not monolithic but have diverse perspectives and varying degrees of religiosity” (176). Ackerman’s novel is the clearest endeavor yet to showcase how American soldiers have come away from the experience of the US occupation yearning to highlight both the ordinary Afghani and Iraqi people sacrificed in the wake of radical insurgent militancy and the manner in which financial capital taints and erodes justice.

Aziz comes into his experiences already hardened with a family legacy of extremist action, as his father serves as part of the coordinated Haqqani network of insurgent fighters who execute the Taliban’s orders against Afghanistan’s government and people. *Green on Blue* opens, however, on a moment of respite. Young Aziz’s mother entrusts him to go and, with his older brother Ali, purchase the family’s daily needs, along with items such as cigarettes for her, which Aziz then conceals for her in a cradle that she used when they were babies. As Aziz reflects, his mother does not discard the cradle because “It was the one thing that was truly hers” and her stratagem of managing Aziz succeeds since, “The truth is, she recognized in me her own ability to deceive” (4). Aziz’s language here records the tacit acknowledgement of Afghani women’s oppression and marginal status among men, as well as his own nascent duplicity with the rest of his family. Ackerman thus organizes Aziz’s psychology around instincts of deception and conflicted allegiance. He operates, duty-bound, to assist his mother, but he does so foregoing patriarchal permission.

The novel’s lull from the coordinates of terror, however, soon dissolve as a wave of militant gunmen, likely seeking reprisal for the Haqqanis’s refusal to “extort taxes along a certain road” (4), enter Aziz’s hometown and shoot indiscriminately at the villagers. Even as Aziz trusts in his father’s ability to survive this onslaught, Ali understands the ruin of their home for the familial devastation that it is. In a metaphor that mediates the rest of the novel, Aziz himself recognizes two parallel circumstances: “My mother’s cradle had collapsed into a

pile of charred sticks. But my father's Kalashnikov lay hidden by the door" (6). Security and all of the other vagaries of childhood fade in the immediate aftermath. Violence, or at least the intimate threat of it, exists as the corollary that follows earlier modes of violence. Aziz's desire to inflict *badal*, a just vengeance, against those who murdered his parents, becomes paramount. Ali and Aziz flee their town and resort to begging on the streets, surviving through four years, and they parlay their panhandling into working as merchant deliveryman on the side, yet one merchant counsels after paying them for their resourcefulness, "I ask no man to trust me and I trust no one. Trust is a burden one puts on another" (11). Ackerman's novel thus deconstructs the concept of indebtedness, holding that loyalty to one another strains the fabric of this Afghani community. Aziz's plight reveals the mercenary mindset that allows vendors to pillage the weak, so that the terror of extremism is echoed in the terror of predatory business. Each transaction operates with the efficiency of a bullet.

Aziz likewise identifies the precarious relationship regarding national loyalty. Amidst the rule of the Taliban in this region, Aziz reflects, "The militants fought to protect us from the Americans and the Americans fought to protect us from the militants, and being so protected, life was very dangerous" (12). Much like the other merchants, Aziz filters ideology down to the core concept of survival. He does not see any vindication in the advance of US military along Afghanistan's mountain roads; rather, he expresses weary concern over how this will incite further skirmishes between Taliban loyalists and American soldiers, with Afghani merchants and villagers, as ever, caught in the crossfire. This foreboding is exacerbated when Ali loses a leg after a bomb detonates in the bazaar (17). Aziz cannot trust in the US military itself delivering vengeance for his brother's maiming, and so he joins a Special Lashkar military unit made up of Afghani recruits led by Commander Sabir in order to get closer to Gazan, the man who Aziz believes orchestrated the bombing, and to procure his own *badal* on Gazan's militia. In his new role, Aziz concerns himself only with a forthright, familial self-interest; there is no larger institutional allegiance governing his action. Further, Commander Sabir is himself exploiting young adults like Aziz who have seen their kin disfigured if not obliterated by bombs, which reveals the thin line that regulates both honor and loyalty.

The precarity that surrounds Aziz and the other young men suggests the reality of fealty, of ownership, of this military unit to Commander Sabir. Even as they seek to locate and terminate Gazan, they come across other Afghanis, like Atal, who barter their intelligence on local insurgents in exchange for cash. The readiness of exploitation between parties is constant,

as Aziz begins to realize. Mr. Jack, an American agent who operates as a mediator between Sabir and US interests, funds the Lashkar unit, “and by that measure also owned us. As we ate our food paid for by the Americans, none of us seemed that different from Atal. And the suspicion we had for him, or the loyalty we had for each other, or the hatred we had for Gazan, all of it seemed of much less concern than the meal in front of us, and tomorrow’s” (84). Ackerman’s novel, as the above passage describes, exposes the concession that polices and normalizes extremist activity. Terrorists, or militants, to use Aziz’s parlance, are placated more often by the financial prospects afforded to their labor than by ideology alone. In a country that is threatened daily by the violent forfeiture of land, roads, or livestock to militants, the capital of their militant labor vastly outnumbers what other Afghani professions could feasibly pay. Thus, Aziz arrives at a realization as to why Gazan’s militants wield such power; they operate as a mirror image of the Special Lashkar military unit run by Commander Sabir. The capital, shelter, and sense of esteem that they secure from their labor is itself the justification for their fealty, though Aziz realizes that each soldier could just as easily shed those values if a better offer is extended.

*Green on Blue’s* narrative soon records the alternative to the dueling US and Taliban militia, and it is an indictment of the abject poverty that migrants and villagers face. After being forced off a side road by Aziz and his military unit, a villager in his mid-twenties displays a box containing the decapitated head of a nephew killed by neighboring villagers who were threatened by the nephew’s attempt to steal pine nuts from them. This man spurns any sense of revenge, though, proclaiming, “You knocked me off this trail, which I drive because your feud with Gazan blocks the north road. My nephew is dead because you starve my village. Now I will bury him far from your fighting. Badal is all I have left and my badal is to deny myself to you, to Gazan, or to any other who speaks of blood” (93). By extricating himself from an ideology of just vengeance and by inverting its execution outward to one inward, of self-denial, this man avoids the dilemma that Aziz finds himself in. Namely, he avoids becoming part of an all-consuming fatalistic passion that supersedes all else. In doing so, this villager dramatizes an out for Aziz to contemplate. This villager has extracted himself from the militant’s exclusionary discourse that repeats this cycle, and so he emerges from the wasteland of the occupation wounded but not broken. If Aziz is willing to acknowledge the fundamental injustice that was waged against his brother, and to then swallow that rage, then he too can escape the cycle.

However, Aziz cannot disentangle himself from the stricture of his just vengeance, even if he is conscious of how nobility exists in this land as a false promise. He nurtures a growing friendship with Atal, continuing an education governed by unlearning: “It is more difficult to learn than to unlearn, but Atal challenged me to understand this war’s true nature, that it had no sides. Each was the same as another” (184). Aziz’s political consciousness constrains itself around rational justification, so that the promise of peace fades as each new offense records its own need for a counter-strike. Aziz’s narrative, and by extension Ackerman’s whole project with *Green on Blue*, articulates how the smallness of a transgression can spiral outward and exhaust any sense of resolution, perpetuating its own vicious cycle into infinity. Closure, then, becomes something fatalistic, rather than an ideal to be longed after.

These characters understand, much like Turner’s Aktar in “The Al Harishma Weapons Market,” that their livelihood is determined in part by perpetuating personal and political vendettas. Late in the novel, when Aziz has infiltrated Gazan’s militia and is moving in for the kill, he confronts Gazan over these ideas:

But I thought you were for the peace, I replied.

Peace isn’t built by soldiers, he said. It is built by others after the soldiers are gone. Men such as Sabir and me don’t know how to bring peace and don’t want to. (221)

In this sense, *Green on Blue* articulates its Sisyphean task. In the immediate aftermath of the US military occupation, warring militia rose up amidst the destabilized Afghani government. With a weakened infrastructure, these militiamen view the vacuum of power around them as a tantalizing excuse to encroach on others and secure their own legacies, which results in deadly skirmishes that generate more and more badal among the young. Gazan privileges local tribalism over any stable sense of the Afghani country. Thus, peace does not exist as a possible endgame from these battles. The goal for those like Gazan turns not toward any pivotal or decisive battle but toward maximizing profits for himself and his family while he lives.

*Green on Blue* culminates as an exposé against Afghani cartels and alliances that profit from nation-building enterprises funded by US capital. As Aziz continues to pursue his badal against Gazan, Atal and Mr. Jack set up a negotiation with Gazan, with Aziz as the muscle protecting their bodily interests. At that point, Atal, who balances an economic interest on

both sides of the militia, reveals that “Sabir wants to build an outpost in our village. He says it’s for our protection, but the construction contracts will fill his pockets. To justify the outpost, Sabir secretly supplies Gazan and keeps him on the attack, mortaring our villages and mining our roads” (223). This new intelligence does not cloud Aziz’s mind in that moment, and he executes his badal, killing all three men in a rush of self-righteousness, opening up a power vacuum in the line of Afghani and US interests. Nonetheless, Aziz now understands that the Special Lashkar military unit to which he belongs is merely an economic boost in an already deceptive war for Commander Sabir. The bomb that was detonated in the market and injured his brother, while executed by Gazan, emerged first from Sabir’s command, exposing the instability of honor in an economic exchange that secures financing through the radicalization of youth and the perpetuation of exhaustive violence. Sabir, that is, has no loyalty beyond expanding his own revenue stream. Aziz functions only as a cog to help him consolidate power and profit, and any agency that Aziz attains in his badal is undone by his understanding that he has been manipulated into this moment.

The depth of Commander Sabir’s stratagems for Aziz become clear in the final pages of the novel, when Aziz’s next operation is revealed to become the figurehead of Gazan’s militia. Sabir instructs Aziz on his new mission, which includes shifting loyalties to Gazan’s fighters; as Sabir reveals, “You’ll lead them and they’ll follow [...] They’ll follow whoever clothes them, feeds them, and arms them. I do all of this and you will do all this through me” (232). Aziz becomes a larger player in the militia, but he remains a pawn in the systemic exploitation that colonizes villagers. His utility did not end with the completion of his badal precisely because the badal itself was engineered and deployed by Sabir’s subterfuge. Instead, Aziz’s pursuit of bloody honor becomes a feint, one that conspires to make him commit deeds that will further impoverish and mutilate and slaughter Afghani bodies for the sake of Sabir’s profiteering in the name of the US occupation effort. The concept of peace, which began the novel as a vague notion, recedes into an impossibility as the crisis of sustained warfare becomes more pragmatic for more and more people, except for the one lone villager who breaks from the cycle. For Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*, the economics of the US occupation effort become a mirror to understand how Afghani innocents are manipulated into battle, as the constancy of “aid” in the form of military units merely propagates how loyalty is an ideology shed by all in the name of greater economic mobility.

In this way, contemporary literature by US war veterans navigates beyond the narrow lens offered by post-9/11 literature. John Duvall and Robert P. Marzec caution that “[t]he brutalities of terrorism obviously extend far beyond the event of 9/11, but the fantasy of exceptionalism carries a constitutive relation to globalized terror. This relation places a special burden on scholars to resist focalizing 9/11 in a way that reproduces Western narcissistic responses similar to those that immediately followed the fall of the towers” (2). Texts by Turner, Klay, and Ackerman refuse to make an exception out of American suffering; instead, their very narrative strategies suture together their combat trauma under a more constitutive lens of globalized suffering that takes into consideration Arab and Persian perspectives. The counterhegemonic vigor embedded in these texts refuse to make US policies sovereign in the transnational discourse between America and the American military-occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. By focalizing their narratives away from autobiography and toward, instead, the subjective experience of Arab, Coptic American, and Persian perspectives, Turner, Klay, and Ackerman denounce the inadequacy of American military spectacle to resolve these crises.

In an essay analyzing links between Iraqi poetry and US veterans’ poetic imaginings, Mara Naaman argues that it is “essential to consider these works in Arabic alongside those by American writers—poets and novelists alike—who attempt to reflect on the Arab other and who critically engage the reality of American military intervention even as they are complicit—or in the case of Turner—actively involved in the war” (370). Since Naaman’s article, a host of US veteran war literature has been published, and the constancy of imagining the foreign Other resonates through each work. Far from villainizing these men and women, US veterans do not articulate an exclusionary, Islamophobic rhetoric against Afghani and Iraqi people; rather, they seek to exhibit multifaceted narratives of the individual, of innocent as well as militant Arab, Coptic American, and Persian bodies. Kevin Powers’s *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Michael Pitre’s *Fives and Twenty Fives* (2014) and Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood* (2016) are other novels that include Arab characters who possess a whole history apart from their engagement with U.S. military bureaucracies. Taken as a larger corpus alongside Turner’s, Klay’s, and Ackerman’s works, these texts move away from reifying concepts of American exceptionalism precisely because they embed themselves within the locus of Arab voices and subjectivities. By articulating the native concerns of Afghan and Iraqi lives, as well as those of Coptic Americans, they counter US military hegemony by revealing subject positions that would otherwise lie at the periphery of US contemporary literature.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a consideration of *Terrorist's* treatment of the Arab American figures, see scholarship by Hartnell, Herman, and Dodou. For consideration of *Falling Man's* Arab American figures, see scholarship by Pöhlmann, DeRosa, and Petrovic.

<sup>2</sup> While *habib* ought perhaps to be translated “beloved,” rather than “love” (Arabic “hubb”), I am choosing to echo Turner’s definition for *habib* as described in his poem “A Soldier’s Arabic” (line 1), which is also included in his collection *Here, Bullet*.

<sup>3</sup> Ackerman’s second novel, *Dark at the Crossing* (2017), continues this trend, exploring an Arab American who, after suffering the failure of his marriage, decides to join the Syrian rebels by crossing from Turkey into Syria in order to fight against Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

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