theories and methodologies

Remaking/Unmaking: Abu Ghraib and Poetry

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So now the pictures will continue to "assault" us—as many Americans are bound to feel. Will people get used to them? Some Americans are already saying that they have seen "enough."

—Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others"

. . . a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

—Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

WHEN THE ABU GHRAIB PRISON TORTURE SCANDAL BEGAN TO CIRCULATE THROUGHOUT THE MASS MEDIA IN SPRING 2004, MOST PUNDITS and commentators neglected to note how those images hauntingly paralleled the 9/11 attacks, insofar as each event's widespread publicity—replayed and reposted images of physical and psychological destruction—participated in the very unmaking that the perpetrators intended. In other words, just as the terrorist act on the Twin Towers was an act of both material and symbolic destruction that required media representation of the planes hitting the towers, mass media's recirculation of visual images of naked and dominated Iraqi men completed the act that Charles Graner and other United States military police had begun. Though the disturbing video representation of the 9/11 attacks rapidly disappeared from television, the Abu Ghraib photos persisted far longer (see York). The rapid disappearance of video of the planes striking the buildings suggests its traumatic power for Americans. But why would the Abu Ghraib photos be less disturbing than those of the attacks of September 11, 2001—given what they say about United States conduct in the war? In this essay, I consider the Abu Ghraib effect in the wider context of imperial imaging of the other. Second, I analyze artistic and literary responses (including Fernando Botero's Abu Ghraib paintings, Daniel Heyman's etchings, and an anthology of poems on torture) that attempt to re-present Abu Ghraib and make visible the invisible of that torture. Third, I sketch out how Arab American poets have played (and can continue to play)

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a critical role in the conversation about the effects of United States policies in the Middle East. Finally, I share my own poetic project, a long poem called "--u --r---" that attempts to make audible the muted voices of the tortured Iraqis at Abu Ghraib.

If the attack on the Twin Towers had led, arguably, not only to the invasion of Afghanistan but also to the deliberations for the so-called preemptive invasion of Iraq, then the images of Abu Ghraib effectively ended the fantasy of United States moral superiority in the war on terrorism. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld worried that the release of more Abu Ghraib photos would "make matters worse" (Sontag)—but he meant worse for the United States' image (and, arguably, for American soldiers on the ground in Iraq) abroad. For W. J. T. Mitchell, these images mark "the unwinnability, if not the outright defeat, of the U.S. war in Iraq, and the war on terror as presently conceived" (303).

Despite Mitchell's claim about the symbolic power of the photographs to pierce the national imaginary—in which we Americans believe that we are a law-abiding and humane people, impervious to the moral depredations that invariably accompany the conduct of war and military occupation—polls in the years after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke have shown a decline in those bothered by the scandal and an increasingly tolerant attitude toward interrogation and torture.[1] Stephen F. Eisenman wonders whether "there is something about the pictures themselves, and past images of torture in different media, that has blunted the natural human response of outrage" (9). In *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, he argues that the photographs evoke representational tropes deeply embedded in Western civilization, as evidenced by art from the Hellenistic period into the modern age. The slackening of outrage, he argues, emerges in part from how the images enact what he calls the "pathos formula," in which the suffering body is represented as "willingly alienated by the victim (even to the point of death) for the sake of the pleasure and aggrandizement of the oppressor" (16). The formula of what he calls "beautiful suffering . . . of subordinates" (111) is one embedded in imperial ideology (marked by orientalist racism, homophobia, and misogyny).[2] The photographs, then, despite their disturbing aspect, can produce an opposite reaction to horror and moral outrage; equally, they can produce what Anna Freud called "identification with the oppressor" (129), a psychic defense against identifying with the victim that imperial ideology requires to maintain hegemony over its beneficiaries-subjects. In a sense, given the absurd administration propaganda that conflated the terrorist attacks of 9/11 with Iraq, Americans could fantasize that Abu Ghraib was just punishment for 9/11.[3] Finally, a third reaction, apathy, is anticipated by the photographs themselves. One initially unreleased photograph of the infamous "Abu Ghraib Man," made available on *Salon.com* nearly two years after the scandal broke, shows Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick in the foreground, his gaze focused down as he clips his fingernails, while, in the background, the hooded Iraqi stands on a box with wires attached to his hands and genitals. The bizarre juxtaposition between Frederick and the tortured man evokes the way in which torture became a banal everyday practice.[4]

In the relative paucity of artistic and literary response to the Abu Ghraib scandal—there have been two films, *The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2006) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008)—a few notable examples have emerged.[5] In Iraq itself, twenty-five artists, including Qasim Alsabti and Abdel-Karim Khalil, produced an exhibition in Baghdad in the summer of 2004, in which "the [dominant] leitmotif . . . is the hooded detainee . . . a man wearing a ragged cloak, his head covered by a bag and his arms outstretched in terrible, but unintended, parody of Jesus' suffering on the cross" (Blanford). Here, too, the profoundly multivalent image of the Abu Ghraib Man

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

figures prominently; its profusion of contradictory associations—the crucifixion pose, the hangman's black hood, the Ku Klux Klan regalia, the black cape of a comic antihero, the torturer's wires like puppet strings—defies any simplistic reading. At the very least, the evocation of Christian imagery must come as a shock to those who believe that our nation is doing God's will. Finally, the pose is apparently called "the 'Vietnam'" (Rejali)—a name that evokes not only the torture position employed by all sides during that war but also the failure of the United States to win that war.

In 2005, the Colombian artist Fernando Botero produced the first extensive artistic response to Abu Ghraib, a series of paintings that represent the torture in ways that emerge both from the Renaissance images of Christ's suffering and from the tradition of antiwar art, from Goya to Picasso. Instead of producing a pathos formula, these paintings, in Arthur C. Danto's words, "establish a visceral sense of identification with the victims." Yet they also are a "disturbatory art—art whose point and purpose it is to make vivid and objective our most frightening subjective thoughts." Thus the paintings ride the tension between inviting our subjective identification with the tortured and demonstrating our own position as complicit witnesses to a war crime. Finally, Botero's outsized cartoonish mesomorphs "often suggest an ability to overcome intensely adverse circumstances . . . [and] a psychological and moral weightiness that commands, if it does not overwhelm, their confined spaces" (Ebony 10). In other words, Botero's figures embody their resistance to the subjective erasure that they had to endure. Yet despite his achievement, it is difficult not to feel that the paintings somehow replicate the problem inherent in the photographs, that the Iraqis remain the exquisitely rendered objects of torment, beyond words.

In the United States, Daniel Heyman's haunting series of etchings—in which he sketched images of an eyewitness surrounded by the language of his testimony—offer a striking window into how traumatizing stories crowd around its victims. The words press in on the storyteller and fill the frame of each etching, as if to suggest the suffocating presence of the torturer. In contrast to the wordless images of Botero, Heyman's sketches embody the hectic experience of the victim as well as Heyman's own process of composition when he became a secondary witness to what the Iraqis endured:

> I sit in this hotel room and draw the face of an Iraqi who is telling the most humiliating and degrading story of his life. I try to disappear. I draw, first a small sketch on a scrap of paper, and then a copper plate using a stylus. As I listen and draw, I am also inscribing the words I hear into the copper, backwards. I have to write very quickly, so that I do not lose the thread of the story.

In Heyman's work, the artist becomes a kind of scribe, an ear for the abused. In the process of writing backward, without much conscious thought, the artist becomes like the analysand retelling his dream. In this way, the artist enacts the psychoanalytic hope that, in the narrating of a trauma, one might be released from it.

Yet the stories Heyman shares have a disturbingly familiar ring. Anyone versed in the narratives of slavery or the Holocaust find uncannily similar modes of punishment. For example, one anecdote told by Heyman echoes Anthony Hecht's poem "More Light! More Light!" (itself a retelling of a story from Eugene Kogon's *The Theory and Practice of Hell*):

> [The American soldiers] knew that in Muslim culture respect for your parents is absolute, and so they asked the father to hit his son. . . . Then they tried to force the son to hit his father, and he wouldn't do it. So they made the father and the son dig a hole in the middle of the prison compound, and they made the son get in it, and they made the father bury him up to his neck. Then they made the son get

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> out of the hole. They were both naked, and then they made the father ride on the back of his son around the compound for an hour.
> (qtd. in Miliard)

Both Heyman's story and Hecht's poem share the painful details of people forced to violate their own humanity by digging a hole in the ground to bury another person alive. In these acts, the tortured are forced to become complicit in the torture of others.

Heyman's Abu Ghraib series refuses to re-present the photographic evidence that extends the crime. In humanizing the tortured, his etchings bring us closer to the victims and allow us to see them as storytellers. In this way, it provides something akin to the work of poetic narratives of witness and resistance and therefore comes closest to performing the kind of cultural labor in which Arab American poets have engaged.

Can poetry document such acts of destruction as Abu Ghraib without replicating the humiliation that the photographs intended to force on its subjects? In the past century, American soldier poets who witnessed the devastation of war, and American civilian poets who had to imagine war, struggled to dramatize what evades language. Civilian poets, distant from the scene of battle and confronted with censored war coverage, employed other sources—documentary evidence, personal testimony, and so on—to engage in an imaginative representation of war. War resistance poets, as I discuss in *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront, since 1941*, confront basic conundrums. How do you represent the brutality of war, when representation has so often idealized and even perpetuated war? How do you bring to American ears the narratives of other peoples? How do you engage in a poetics of identification, how do you assert defiantly the humanity of the other, without erasing our own nationality and without erasing the particularity of that other?

Poets as different as Wilfred Owen, Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov, and June Jordan have made visible the ultimate destruction of bodies and minds that warfare requires.[6] Yet even in the act of witnessing or imagining war, the mimetic powers of representation are not easily harnessed. Since the representation of war's brutality in visual and literary arts invariably courts idealization of war as an arena of masculine formation, a testing ground where human subjectivity is challenged to its limits, poetry written by warrior-pacifists like Owen have in some cases encouraged people to enlist. The poet W. D. Ehrhart once admitted that Owen's poems were an influence in Ehrhart's decision to join the Marines during the Vietnam War.

Clearly, poetry is not limited to visual representation, though it often draws tremendous energies from imagery. One way to document Abu Ghraib, to make war come alive, is to make it audible. We must extend Botero's notion of the role of the painter as one who "can do things a photographer can't do, because a painter can make the invisible visible" (qtd. in Ebony). Poetry's relation to the spoken word offers another register of representation: poetry can make the invisible audible. It can lend an ear, and give voice, to the silenced bodies.

Arab American poets have played a critical role in the post-9/11 cultural landscape, as Americans sought ways of understanding the Middle East. Elmaz Abinader, Etel Adnan, Sinan Antoon, Hayan Charara, Nathalie Handal, Lawrence Joseph, Fady Joudah, Mohja Kahf, Khaled Mattawa, D. H. Melhem, K. Silem Mohammad, and Naomi Shihab Nye have dramatized the complexities not only of the Arab world but also of Arab American life, of living in the hyphen.[7] The role of Arab American poets in this current war is multiple, and I do not wish to delimit it. First, in their lyric subjectivity, they have become models of identity; they have embodied and spoken to the richness of Arab and Arab American culture. In this way, the cultural work of Arab

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American literature parallels the cultural work of other ethnic literatures, and the struggles of Arab American writers are seen to replicate the struggle in African American writing between the writer's responsibility to the art and the writer's responsibility to the community.

Second, Arab American poets have played a critical role in at least two kinds of translation. They have translated from the Arabic voices and stories from Iraq (and elsewhere in the Middle East) that create a narrative of the war that complicates an official narrative that has for too long refused to face the realities on the ground. Already, English-speaking Iraqis have made critical contributions to our understanding of the war on the ground, from a civilian's perspective. Salam Pax and Riverbend, whose blogs have been read by thousands—not to mention the unnamed courageous stringers who have enabled Western reporters to get stories outside the Green Zone—have counternarrated the perspectives of embedded journalists, whose stories naturally sympathize with those who provide them cover and security.[8] Relatedly, the vital translations of Arab poets by Arab American poets, such as Fady Joudah's translation of Mahmoud Darwish (*The Butterfly's Burden*) and Khaled Mattawa's translations of contemporary Iraqi poets (Fadhil Azzawi, Saadi Youssef), provide a nuanced literary view into the subjectivities and narratives of the Middle East.

Finally, in addition to employing translation skills, Arab American poets, in the tradition of documentary and war resistance poetry, have also begun to translate into poetic works the oral and documentary materials available from both official administration sources and independent media outlets. From personal and familial anecdotes of life in war-torn nations in the Middle East to materials now declassified, their poetry draws on a global repository of informational, cultural, and literary resources to illuminate, narrate, and give voice to Arab and Arab American experience. These works strengthen our historical memory so that, when the history of the moment is distilled to official sound bites and images, we have an imaginative archive that obstinately refuses to let what has happened be effaced.

This modest critical framework is a tentative description of and exhortation for what can be in poetry. It constitutes a rejection of identity politics as the purpose of poetry. It is a call not for mere protest poetry but for a poetry commensurate with the complexities of being Arab and American in a time of war. Every United States war, after all, to echo Maxine Hong Kingston, is a civil war, insofar as we are a nation of all nations (Heyen 223). On a more personal note, these post-9/11 years have induced in me, an Arab American, both terrifying speechlessness and a renewed sense of responsibility to speak out. Arab Americans are the invisibly visible; considered white on census forms, most of us look, feel, and are looked on as part of the nonwhite peoples. In the wake of the attacks, I remember being hyperaware of my Arabness and recall catching paranoid glances from strangers—as if they accused me of being a terrorist. Even more strangely, I felt as if somehow I was responsible for these attacks: the pictures of the terrorists in the newspaper looked almost like a bunch of cousins, a Warhol rendering of a family photo album (the women weirdly excluded). From a rational standpoint, the feeling is ludicrous; my worldview is so different from the attackers, they could be from a different universe. Yet identification is identification and reductively, absurdly so. Once, in 2002, on an international flight, an elderly white woman across the aisle stared at me nearly the entire trip—and her eyes grew wide as I slowly removed my shoes. What could I say?

It is out of this vertiginous sense of being named but silenced, and out of the parallel sense of seeing Iraqis (and Arabs in general) named and silenced, that compelled my poetic encounter with Abu Ghraib. In a sense, I began writing "--u --r---," a series of poems based on the testimony of Abu Ghraib torture

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

victims, as a way to read the testimonies in the first place, because they were too painful to read straight through. In this palimpsestic work, I have engaged in a process of writing by erasure, taking the transcripts from Mark Danner's *Torture and Truth* and removing language until only certain remnants of the voices of the abused prisoners remained, scattered throughout the page. Derived in part from postmodern collage—particularly recent books that have used erasure as a way of building a poem—this technique was my attempt to enact Elaine Scarry's notion of torture as unmaking on the level of syntax and narrative. For Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, the act of torture is not ultimately an act to extract information from a detainee but a procedure intended to destroy human subjectivity. Applying Scarry to Abu Ghraib means to interrogate the notion that what occurred there was anything less than torture. Poetry is, after all, a making, and faced with the profound unmaking that is war, poets ought to neither gloss over nor fetishize the suffering of others. My "--u --r---" attempts to dramatize both the psychology of the torturers and the strength of spirit that these prisoners showed by speaking out against their victimization. In this way, the poem participates in the secondary witness offered by both Botero and Heyman.

The title, "--u --r---," attempts to register the erasure of Abu Ghraib from our popular memory. It demonstrates the ways in which the voices of these men were disappeared. It evokes the ancient city of Ur, in Babylon (modern-day Iraq), the birthplace of civilization. To quote Walter Benjamin, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Finally, the title attempts to act as a kind of mirror—not of Nature only, of our selves as well. It is the gesture of *ecce homo*. As I revised the poem, I was shocked by how biblical the testimonials felt. The early poems include a number of characters: G (Graner, a guard), J (Joyner, another guard), and A (Amjid, a prisoner). G was in some ways like God, J in some ways like Jesus, and A like Adam. As a way of bringing to the surface what was embedded in the text, I added interstitial lines from Genesis. Torture is an act of decreation, an inverse of the stories of creation and destruction from Hebrew scripture. The Abu Ghraib torture brought not only its perpetrators and victims but also its witnesses into confrontation with the perils of unchecked, godlike power. In the process of collaging, I may be diluting the impact of the direct speech of their testimonies, yet I take this risk in order to speak to something that this specific act of torture has come to represent. In a nation in which Judeo-Christian values are employed for political ends, it seems worthwhile to invite further reflection on whether we have fulfilled those ethical injunctions.

--***u*** **--*r***--- (Excerpts)

1.

In the beginning

I saw myself *on the face of the deep*

And G the door

And the darkness he called Night

released my hand from the door

he called Night

the window of the room

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a firmament in the midst of *waters*
the first days came
face to face
from top and bottom
our image *dominion*

every creeping thing
laughing
their names

2.

In the begin
the first day

a blanket *a firmament*
the door opened
G was there
and let them have
the chair until the chair was broken
and breathed

a miracle I lived
new guard that wears glasses

I saw things no one would see
then your eyes shall be opened
father and son
his father naked
into the toilet "go take it and eat it"

and your eyes shall be

dogs G brought the dogs

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3.

On the third day G came

made me no clothing

wires on my fingers penis

bag over my head

saying electric

flash of the camera

thy voice in the garden

and I fell down

thy voice

made me stand carry

a deep sleep to fall made me

white chair high in the air came down

till thou return unto the ground

I woke up to sleep

4.

In the name of God, I swear to God everything I am

rose flowers the bag over

whoever was with me experienced the same

olive covered

And it came to pass

the Isolation was full but the bags were over

our heads we couldn't see their faces to wear this under-

his countenance

And from thy face shall I be hid

I was nothing else

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

G my hands

And from thy face

the metal of the window

hanging there

from thy face

to pray

over my head

night

of me me I lost

8.

his name is G

stand in shameful

"Do you believe in anything"

my broken

ark which he had made

I lost

I lost

G came and laughed

and, lo, in her mouth

it will break again

arms behind

does it hurt

broken because I can't

sever pain

X

X the hard

site

while the earth remaineth

some pictures

shall not cease

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

9.

First the man A
stripped cursed
the fear of you and the dread of you
pushed the first on top of the others
A refused G
into your hand are they delivered
ordered to stand
pour water
testicles with gloves hand-
cuffed *into your hand*
water
G pouring water
screaming
"my heart"
And the waters shall *flood* *all flesh*
all this beating
to stitch the string the needle
the operation succeeded

13.

me
he me he
he me

I he

he he then he
he me I
he he he

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

separate thyself, I pray thee, from me

I I G

me me I

I He He

I

I I

I

16.

They beat and they cursed

his head his head

They brought

and they pushed

G beat

and they took

they took and they beat and they hand

and thou seest *looked after*

They brought

they brought and they beat

his nose

his nose

they beat they fall

them fell his feet

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This coda, "Songs for Joe Darby," employs the words of the heroes of the Abu Ghraib story. Sergeant Joe Darby passed along to investigators the CD of torture images that Graner had lent him. He has since left the military and was driven out of his hometown because of death threats, for acting on his conscience.

1.

Everybody

Everybody

Everybody is

in their own little worlds

2.

You have to understand mortar

mortars

normal mortars

flying

coming in

3.

a prison prayer group

sitting in rows

mortar

had to dig through the bodies

retina scan

looking for eyeballs an eyeball we could use

4.

not to ask you don't ask

didn't ask didn't

know the prisoner

a prisoner

"The prisoner is dead."

"We weren't here. Have a good day."

They were They don't

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5.

I'm not the kind of rat
I've kept a lot of secrets
regret exceeded
the line the choice

6.

I anonymous my name
burned
the pictures

pictures

explode

7.

I I
I gun to sleep
I slept closet
metal I could close
I exposed I hung
I lie
I listen

Notes

Thanks to Khaled Mattawa and to the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI) for the opportunity to share a version of this piece at the 2007 RAWI conference. Thanks to Paul Lauritzen for inviting me to participate in a human rights seminar, where I first read Mark Danner's *Torture and Truth*. Thanks, finally, to Fady Joudah, for receiving the "--u --r---" poems with enthusiastic critical feedback, and to Mark Weiss, for publishing a selection in *Seneca Review*.

1. Polls taken in 2004 showed that "54 per cent of Americans were bothered a great deal" by the Abu Ghraib scandal; by 2005, that number had declined to 40% (Eisenman 8). A Washington Post–ABC poll in 2004 found that 63% "say that torture is never acceptable" (Morin and Deane). Yet a 2005 Pew Research poll showed that only 32% of Americans believed that torture can never be justified (Carney). The 2007 Pew poll showed that number dipped to 29% (Empirical Legal Studies). The recent controversy over waterboarding suggests that when actual torture techniques are described in detail, people gain a more vivid, image-based understanding of what torture might feel like (in waterboarding, it feels like drowning).

2. Many critics, such as Sontag, Eisenman, David Ebony, and Michelle Brown, have noted the homologies between the Abu Ghraib images and representations of racialist oppression in the United States. Attack dogs,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1596 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Klan-like hoods, incarceration, and other lynching-related images suggest the connections between oppression at home and abroad.

3. For Lila Rajiva, the Abu Ghraib scandal was not a case of a few twisted, hick reservists, or even merely a case of systematic abuse, but rather the revelation of a policy of imperial domination as such, a "*return of the repressed*" (170). Further, she notes how the story of abuse of Iraqi women prisoners—not to mention the dramatic rise in rape, kidnapping, and honor killings since the invasion of 2003—went largely unreported, because it gave lie to the narrative that the occupation of Iraq was about liberating Iraqi women (132–37).

4. The archive of Abu Ghraib images contains "a total of 1,325 images of suspected detainee abuse, 93 video files of suspected detainee abuse, 660 images of adult pornography, 546 images of suspected dead Iraqi detainees, 29 images of soldiers in simulated sexual acts, 20 images of a soldier with a Swastika drawn between his eyes, 37 images of Military Working dogs being used in abuse of detainees and 125 images of questionable acts" (qtd. in M. Benjamin).

5. According to Ebony, "the scant number of American artists willing to respond to Abu Ghraib is surprising considering the country's long tradition of tackling front page headlines with violent content and politically loaded themes" (13). Yet, as Mitchell has demonstrated, the Abu Ghraib Man has become an icon of sorts, employed in a host of media—not only in the fine arts. The Freeway Blogger, for instance, employed the image with a compressed text—"if this was / our policy [image of the Abu Ghraib Man] / We're losing / a hell of a lot / more than just a war"—and hung it alongside a highway (see Metres, "*Lang/scape*"). The war on terror—in particular, the mass incarceration and detention of suspects, the use of extraordinary rendition and black sites, and the use of torture—has continued to incite literary response. Building on *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (Forché), one recent chapbook anthology, *Cut Loose the Body: An Anthology of Poems on Torture and Fernando Botero's Abu Ghraib Paintings* (Berger and Ross), gathers poems by American, Spanish, and Guantanamo Bay prison poets dealing with the physical and psychic suffering that comes from war, torture, and imprisonment. Drawing connections between Gitmo and Abu Ghraib, remarkable poems—such as Sinan Antoon's "Wars I," E. Ethelbert Miller's "Fruit," D. Nurkse's "Albi," Naomi Shihab Nye's "Watch Your Language"—vibrate with the moral terror of secondary witness.

6. The poetic response to the Iraq War has been significant. Just a few recent notable books and journals that engage the issues of the war are *Big Bridge*'s "War Papers," Robert Hass's *Life and Materials*, H. L. Hix's *God Bless*, Maxine Kumin's *Still to Mow*, O Books's War and Peace anthologies, and Bob Perelman's *Iflife*.

7. At the risk of reducing the individual achievements of Arab American poets, I would direct readers first to *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988); *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (2000); *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001); and *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008).

8. The Palestinian American Amal Amireh, in her blog "Improvisations: Arab Woman Progressive Voice" (arabwomanprogressivevoice.blogspot.com), for example, performs a dual critical labor of holding accountable both the United States, for its execrable policies in the Middle East, and Arab nations, for their often regressive policies regarding gender rights, free speech, and religious tolerance.

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