



# Iraq War Cultures

EDITED BY Cynthia Fuchs and Joe Lockard

## INTRODUCTION

# "Shrapnel throughout the Body"

U.S. War Culture and Iraq

CYNTHIA FUCHS & JOE LOCKARD

---

There are photos as well—one shows a father rushing through the street,  
his face torn with a last frantic hope,  
His son in his arms, rag-limp, chest and abdomen speckled with deep,  
dark gashes and smears of blood.

Propaganda's function, of course, is exaggeration: the facts are there,  
though, the child is there . . . or not there.

—C. K. WILLIAMS, "SHRAPNEL"

"Our combat mission is ending, but our commitment to Iraq's future is not" (White House 2010). Precious little fanfare accompanied President Barack Obama's announcement on 31 August 2010 that the last U.S. combat troops were leaving Iraq. Unlike the countdown that George W. Bush's 18 March 2003 declaration that Saddam Hussein and his sons had to leave Iraq in 48 hours ("Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing") or his notorious assertion on 2 May 2003 that the mission was accomplished, the withdrawal of U.S. troops took place quietly and over long days and nights. Supply trucks and Stryker vehicles rolled across the border into Jordan, as soldiers in helmets and sunglasses kept watch, and occasionally spoke with U.S. reporters. On 19 August, Staff Sgt. Steven Bearor of Merrimac, N.H., summed up, "The best part of getting back to Kuwait? One, I know no one else is going to get hurt, and, two, I'm going home" (PBS 2010).

As noble and hopeful—and narrowly focused on U.S. casualties—as the sergeant’s sentiment may have been, the truth is, as Obama underscored that night, the hostility continues. “Even as Iraq continues to suffer terrorist attacks,” he said, “Security incidents have been near the lowest on record since the war began. And Iraqi forces have taken the fight to al Qaeda, removing much of its leadership in Iraqi-led operations.” Between such “incidents” and “fighting,” it is plain that more people will be hurt.

The Iraq War, in other words, persists, as do the cultures that both structure and emerge from it. Iraq is now a profoundly fractured post-war state, the result of self-admitted American errors in the past and continuing confusion since. In his speech on 31 August 2010, President Obama went on to say, “Of course, violence will not end with our combat mission. Extremists will continue to set off bombs, attack Iraqi civilians and try to spark sectarian strife. But ultimately, these terrorists will fail to achieve their goals.” To keep back this amorphous threat, U.S. entanglements with Iraq are only beginning, in material and figurative senses. As the *New York Times* observed on 16 October 2010, the line between “terrorists” and others is ever more difficult to draw, as former members of the Awakening Councils have been turning to Al Qaeda for answers, or at least questions formulated in response to their recent wartime and occupation experiences. (Williams and Adnan 2010). The unrelenting war in Afghanistan—now termed “Obama’s War” as the Administration has accelerated drone attacks and sanctioned assassinations even as it has “accepted and approved the path of peace” the Karzai government has taken via negotiations with “moderate” elements of the Taliban—demonstrates the long-term American investment in the “war on terror.”

Stateside, and in multiple ways, Bush’s war remains a problem for Obama’s America, burdened with a legacy of debt, political skepticism, and civic restlessness, both in the States and abroad. At the same time, Iraq War cultures endure in U.S. and international popular texts, shaping cynicism as much as conviction, manifest in frustrations ranging from the left to the right, the Net Roots to the Tea Parties. Even as the United States distances itself from “combat operations” in Iraq, effects of the war continue to be felt, shifting, painful, and pervasive.

The C.K. Williams poem above describes the visible effects of war injuries, the damage done to an Iraqi child’s body by American-made and -fired shrapnel, and his father’s grief. But we might ask: can any representation of that death—poetic or photographic—portray its gruesomeness and injustice? Efforts to represent, whether in film, drama, video games or literature, are at once expository and allusive, limited and provocative. Like the shrapnel that penetrated the child’s body, in Iraq and again in Williams’ mind’s eye, U.S. society is penetrated by cultural representations of violence, representations that cannot dematerialize the real anguish of Iraq and its people.

\*\*\*\*\*

How do U.S. consumers absorb violent imagery? In this collection Patrick Brantlinger argues that the mystification of terror conceals the ordinariness of violence in the United States. The imputation of foreign threat obscures the real source of fear and terror in daily life in the United States. Although the Obama administration early on distanced itself from the phrase “war on terror” (*Washington Post*, 25 March, 2009), post-9/11 fears of the Middle East continue to dominate U.S. popular culture. Can we imagine an un-terrified world, Brantlinger asks, one that rejects the imposition of terror as the paradigm for global relations? For Leanne McRae, another sort of paradigm is constructed in popular memory. Her chapter in this book analyzes the Bush Administration’s use of 9/11 iconography—photos, footage—as a new centerpiece of American nationalism, drawing on imagery from World War II to legitimate the invasion of Iraq. Calculated official discourses, according to both Brantlinger and McRae, built a rhetorical culture that facilitated the Iraq War.

David Clearwater looks at the influence of video games on public support for the Iraq War in “Zap the Iraqoids! War and Video Games,” and maps a representational history of war video games from the Gulf War forward. Video games have become a preferred means through which the U.S. military shapes public expectations of war, recruits volunteers for service, and trains those recruits. Beyond fetishizing generic combat violence, the new games feature virtual simulations of advanced land weaponry that is currently in development, thus shaping perceptions of today’s wars as thrillingly futuristic.

Taking up another sort of fetishistic imagery, Murray Pomerance looks at the history of American movie representations of Arabs, beginning nearly a century ago in silent films, through 2005’s *Syriana*, linking them to 19th century imperialist ideologies. Pomerance’s tour of these filmic engagements with the Middle East underlines the extent to which broad stereotypes govern Hollywood productions and so allow military action in Iraq to look like self-defense rather than invasion. Cynthia Fuchs’ “‘You Just Want Stories’: Iraqi Subjects, American Documentaries” looks at another sort of representation, as U.S. documentary makers focus on Iraqi interview and observational subjects, revealing and investigating cultural biases even in the most well intentioned of relationships. Anna Froula’s chapter turns towards the parodic critique of U.S. empire in 2004’s *Team America: World Police*. She points to its dissection of neoliberal consumerism, especially as it is confused with “freedom,” concluding that the movie demonstrates how “Americans are inherently complicit in the national imperialist enterprise, even if motivated by good intentions.”

Given these parameters, how can cultural production confront military violence more explicitly and link it to socio-economic regimes? Tony Perucci revisits the photographs of Abu Ghraib as a violent spectacle produced by neoliberalism’s demands

for the pacification of economic markets. Here the photos are not deviant, but symptomatic, a performance directed against who refuse to integrate into the global marketplace. Though President Bush declared, “That’s not how we do things in America,” Perucci submits that the CIA torture memos released in April 2009 reveal that this is very much how things have been done in and by America (*New York Times*, Mayer).

It is hardly surprising that the invasion of Iraq occurred against a specifically American historical backdrop, including the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. This specter has had recent effects, as when the military refused to let Joan Baez to sing at Walter Reed Hospital (*Washington Post*, May 2, 2007). Some months later, President Bush attempted to expel these ghosts in a lengthy speech in Kansas City before the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He denounced the Iraq-Vietnam analogy at length (American Presidency Project). But, as Zoe Trodd and Nathaniel Nadaff-Hafrey argue, the Vietnam war cannot be exorcized from U.S. cultural memory. Their chapter examines the “feedback loop” that continually repeats Vietnam-era fears and themes, tracing it across political rhetoric, music, video games, documentary films, poetry, and journalism.

Stephanie Athey looks to memoir for such connections, specifically, Tony Lagournis’ *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator’s Dark Journey Through Iraq* (2007). He reveals how torture, hardly secret but nonetheless shameful behavior during the Vietnam War, emerged as a marketable self-redemption narrative during the Iraq War. As Athey observes, violence systems mask and mitigate criminal culpability by alleging the existence of “bad apples,” that subordinates betrayed their military superiors.

Even as more information emerges concerning who ordained what tactics, apologists for the Iraq War contend that the abuses of prisoners dishonor the warrior code and the intrinsic nobility of state violence. The two final essays of this volume argue otherwise, that U.S. educational culture produces violence—even excessive violence—so it is normative, not exceptional. Kenneth Saltman traces the recent history of a private non-profit corporation’s “democracy promotion” in Iraq and other countries. The “new imperialism” of the Iraq War and authoritarian privatization, Saltman argues, share the same ideological origins. Such education and promotion can be understood in multiple ways. For Henry Giroux, Abu Ghraib reveals inherent racism, dehumanization, and social hierarchies. It also provides a point from which we can begin to rethink education’s role in creating a political culture that values dialogue and dissent, one that rejects “the irresponsible violence-as-first-resort ethos of the Bush administration.” Tragic and outrageous as it is, the Iraq War also provides an opportunity for education and recreation.

\*\*\*\*\*

A book that interrogates the representations of an ongoing war is premised on many complications, not least being the war's irresolution. This one has evolved over time, and so we owe special thanks to our contributors, who must have wondered when and in what form their essays would see daylight.

*Iraq War Cultures* has several origins. It began as an editorial concept behind a series of essays published in *Bad Subjects*, the journal of a political and cultural studies collective in which Joe Lockard participated for many years. Cynthia Fuchs' continuing work on U.S. popular culture and media criticism has also led to a separate book project on post-9/11 war documentaries. Plans for this volume arose after we organized a packed-house "Iraq War Culture" panel at the Modern Language Association's 2005 convention, an occasion later castigated by Accuracy in Academia on grounds that "Getting current events insights from English professors is a risky proposition." (Kline & Seymour, 2007, 37). We have been aided in this work by the encouragement and forbearance of our editor Mary Savigar, production manager Bernadette Shade, and the staff of Peter Lang Publishing, who have brought the book to press. We also thank our friends, students, and colleagues at George Mason University and Arizona State University, who have supported our work.

—CF & JL

## WORKS CITED

- Castronovo, Russ (2001). *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- "Karzai Welcomes Obama's Suggestion of Talks with Taliban." (2009). Radio Free Europe. 8 March.
- Kline, Malcom & Julia Seymour (2007). *The Real MLA Stylebook* Washington, DC: Accuracy in Academia.
- Mayer, Jane (2008). *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* New York: Doubleday.
- New York Times* (2009). "A Guide to the Torture Memos."
- Obama, Barack (2010). "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq." 31 August 2010.
- PBS Transcript. 19 August 2010.
- White House (2009). "Remarks of President Barack Obama—Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," February 27, 2009.
- Williams, CK. (2010) *Wait*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Williams, Timothy, and Duraid Adnan (2010). "Sunnis in Iraq Allied with U.S. Quitting to Rejoin Rebels." *The New York Times*. 16 October 2010.
- Wilson, Scott, and Al Kamen. (2009). "Global War on Terror' Is Given New Name." *Washington Post* (March 25). p. A4.
- Wiltz, Teresa. (2007). "Joan Baez Unwelcome at Concert for Troops," p. C1. *Washington Post* (May 2).