

A Soldier-Poet Testimonies: The US-Iraq War in Brian Turner's Poetics

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on Brian Turner's poems "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and "Caravan" as testimonies of an American soldier-poet, Brian Turner (1957-), who held the position of an infantry unit leader during the 2003 US-led invasion on Iraq under the pretext of the existence of mass destruction weapons. It argues how Turner, as an eyewitness to the fatal violence of war against Iraq, exposes the traumatic memories of a survivor who experienced these events in person. This study shows how the concept of testimony is employed in Brian Turner's poems, "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and "Caravan," as a form of a poetic model of literature and statement of evidence presented to the history of humanity. The findings of this study demonstrate Turner's sufferings as a veteran who served in the US-led war against Iraq. Turner's selected poems, as testimonial documents, show how those who have lived through war endure the effects of war. He, as a survivor of political violence, attests to the facts of history and prevents removing the events through negation, denial, or forgetting. To conclude, the literature of war poetry bears witness to the aftermaths of violence. Since 2003, the US-Iraqi War has increasingly influenced writings that recounts the experiences of wartime. Turner's testimonial poems explore how writing poetry acts as a means of recovery from trauma and as a method of bearing witness and giving testimonies of the devastation and negative effects resulting from the recent Iraq war.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Turner's texts do belong in many ways in the soldier-poet tradition: he is a direct witness of both war's horrors and of soldiers' remarkable spirit of sacrifice. Yet, Turner's poetry is also animated by a sincere desire to produce a record of events open to the viewpoints, the culture, and the history of the people of Iraq." (Mariani, 2020, p. 248)

These lines serve as a unique illustration and a brief instance for the central assumption of this study, which attempts to read and analyze Turner's poetical texts of war as a direct witness of war's horrors. Through these lines, Mariani underlines a realistic dimension, which strengthens our study. This study aims to present Turner's realistic perspectives of conflict as a testimony on which this examination of warfare has been established.

The war led by the US against Iraq, also known as the "war on terror," was aimed at reducing extremism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Critics argue it exposed the US double-standard democracy and challenged the belief in US power's benignity. The September 11 attacks were seen as a pretext to validate government misuse of power and hide a strategically organised

military campaign against Arab and Islamic nations. The war has been criticised for its recklessness and the prevailing American ideology (Mahmoud, 2016, p. 1-2).

The West often portrays the East as second-hand and invents pretexts to interfere in their affairs. This was evident in the US's invasion of Iraq under the plea of having weapons of mass destruction, aiming to save Iraqis and the world from the dictating regime. This warfare ultimately led to the devastation of the country under the pretence of freedom (Hassan & Ayyed, 2022, p. 695). Danju et al., in their paper entitled "The Reasons Behind U.S. Invasion of Iraq," mentioned that:

"The United Nations (UN) was mandated to investigate the claims that Iraq was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. The inspectors were sent in but after months of investigation, they could not find any Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. US intelligence was faulty since it proved that such Weapons of Mass Destruction did not exist." (2013, p. 683)

The US is often seen as advocating for freedom and democracy through its military mission in Iraq. However, the military mission led by the US in Iraq, allegedly aimed at liberating and self-leading Iraq, has proven to be the contrary. The military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has not effectively enhanced US stability or security in the Middle East. Instead, it has contributed to the emergence of unstable governments, heightened dictatorship, and escalated violence. The mayhem, devastation, and state of lawlessness in Iraq, along with the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal and the slaughter of Fallujah, demonstrate the destructive, imperial ideology of the US. Edward Said argues that every empire claims to be unique, and has a purpose to promote civilization, enlightenment, order, and democracy, with force being used only as a last option (Mahmoud, 2016, p. 2).

The American occupation of Iraq has led to a state of chaos and lawlessness, particularly after the retreat of American militaries. This extremism contributed to the spread of brutal violence, as exemplified by ISIS. Noam Chomsky contends that US policy has encouraged sectarianism since the beginning of the military occupation. Former CIA officer Graham Fuller believes the US is one of the main initiators of ISIS, stating that its destructive interferences in the Middle East and the conflict in Iraq were the main reasons. The war has not only left victims' bodies scarred but also psychologically traumatized many American soldiers, with one in five veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from PTSD or serious dejection. As a result, many veterans and soldiers resort to antidepressants in record numbers, leading to accusations of America maintaining the strength of its militaries through treatment drugs. In an awful incident, a US soldier killed five of his mates at an army clinic in Baghdad, highlighting the ongoing hostility against US soldiers in Iraq (Mahmoud, 2016, p.3).

The American propaganda about Iraq's alleged possession of mass destruction weapons led to the recruitment of poet and soldier Brain Turner to serve in Iraq. He committed his poetries to expose the reality and counteract the misinformation after witnessing the horrors of war and the misleading allegations made by his authority. He began to write poetry in which he expressed his veneration for the culture of Iraq as if he were part of this Iraqi society. Through the celebration of their cultural heritage and history, his poems aim to de-stereotype Iraqi citizens (Hassan & Ayyed, 2022, p. 696).

Turner wrote his collections, "*Here, Bullet* (2005), *Phantom Noise* (2010), and *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014)", in which he outlined the negative effects on both Iraqi civilians and American soldiers, as well as Iraqi insurgents, which are evident in the physical and psychological harm inflicted upon them. Turner's experience as a military team commander within the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, during his year of service in Iraq, has prompted scholars to express diverging viewpoints regarding his poetry. Some scholars argue from the perspective of Turner's whiteness, emphasizing the hegemonic privilege that underlies his work. Conversely, others draw attention to how Turner's poetry

attempts to conceal this privilege by focusing on the stories and traditions of ordinary Iraqi people (Petrovic, 2018, p. 4).

The selected two poems being examined are chosen from Brian Turner's collections *Here*, *Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*, which explore his experiences as a commander of an American military company in Iraq. Turner has a keen attraction to poetry to effectively convey traumatic testimony, as shown in his many writings and public speeches. Through his active involvement in the battlefield, he discovers a means of expressing and relieving the contradictory feelings that arise inside him in his poetry. This paper focuses on two specific poems by Turner, "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and "Caravan," to reveal the truth about the American war against Iraq, he presents a speech that exposes the crimes committed. This speech serves as a response to the untruthful information spread by the government of the US and its media, claiming that Iraq and its people pose a warning to global peace due to their ownership of weapons of massive destruction.

The truth of war poetry can only be criticized by those who have personally endured the realities of battle. Turner's poems convey the destruction, miseries, and horror of the war on Iraq, bringing the realities of the war to the reader from the perspective of an American soldier. Turner, as an American poet and veteran of the war in Iraq, unfolds through the literature of war, particularly poetry, the serious consequences of war victims and survivors to articulate their suffering and attest to the realities of war. Turner's poetry is a cry to break the silence forced upon war victims and survivors.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. War Literature

Throughout the years of conflicts and in the aftermath of World War II, widespread suffering and trauma were prevalent throughout the global population. World Wars had a profound impact on several aspects of human existence, including literature. Literature, being an essential component of human culture, serves not only as a means to convey personal experiences but also as a medium to document historical events that have shaped our current knowledge of the world.

War literature investigates and responds to warfare, offering a variety of perspectives in poetry, fiction, and drama. It extends beyond the soldier's experience at the battle scene. Although there has been a significant amount of war literature produced throughout literary history, there is still a considerable amount of war literature yet to be produced. Despite the abundance of war-related publications, there exists a need for additional written works on the subject, particularly those that show creativity. Accordingly, the reason for this urge is to understand existence on a deeper level and to gain insight into the tremendous tragedies and mysteries that accompany battles. War literature is associated with providing an authentic portrayal of war. Critics have emphasized the necessity for the public to possess a deeper comprehension of the tragic human suffering of warfare. Therefore, the significant function that literature on war plays in exposing certain realities about the war is emphasized (Dayekh, 2020, p. 187).

Literature that compels readers to consider the viewpoint of the victim is just as necessary now as it was in the past. Seeing conflicts from a wider perspective of human experience, rather than only focusing on their political implications allows us to uncover insights about ourselves, our society, and our own existence that may be learned from such literary works. War literature provokes profound contemplation on the distressing themes of war. It highlights the distinct nature of human life, specifically focusing on the extensive and profound pain experienced by individuals who have been victimized, as well as the impact on their nations (Dayekh, 2020, p. 188).

In addition to the need for war literature to awaken society to the horrors of war, it may also serve as instructive antiwar messaging by exposing the brutal realities of the conflict. Hence, researchers observe that the opinion of the victim is consistently neglected and their

voice is consistently silenced. Due to this high level of selectivity, the truth is never fully achieved, unless it is distorted in its very essence. When it comes to Iraqi war literature, the general public, particularly the American public, still lacks a comprehensive understanding of the immense misery that the war has inflicted upon the people (Lan, 2009, p. 99). Lan asserts that:

"Despite television, embedded reporters, and the internet, most Americans are today equally unaware of the horrors that the American invasion has inflicted on millions of Iraqis. With God and Religion with the United States in the Philippines a hundred years ago and still with America today in Iraq, there is no need to consider others, no need to contemplate the possibility that they too have lives and hopes. That they too feel pain, bleed, and die". (qtd. in Dayekh, 187)

Yet, there was a remarkable increase in poetry production throughout the years of the war. The rise of interest in poetry is mainly caused by the intensity of suppressed emotions that arise during times of conflict, particularly in an atmosphere that is heavily influenced by propaganda and censorship. The concise and focused nature of poetry was well-suited to capture the intense and fragmented sensations of warfare, Mackay states "The brevity and concentration of poetry suited the intensities and fractured experiences of wartime during the long hours of waiting in shelter, camp, hospital, and transport" (2009, p. 16).

War poetry refers to poems that focus on the theme of war or are written during a time of war, demonstrating an apparent impact on the author. It is a kind of poetry known as war poetry or front-line poetry, mostly created by young soldiers who participated in war (Alexander, 2007, p. 335). The labels "war poet" and "war poetry" originated during World War I and were distinctive to that era. Poetry has always been interested in warfare, with prominent literary pieces from the latter part of the nineteenth century focusing on military personnel. English war poetry was mostly authored by non-military individuals and lacked a distinct and well-defined identity. Nevertheless, during the remarkable period from 1914 to 1918, the genre of soldier-poetry emerged and the soldier-poet became a distinct genre (Das, 2013, p. 5).

War poetry, since the Anglo-Saxon era, was mostly written by people who had no involvement in actual combat. Therefore, whatever they published only reflected their subjective opinions or imagination of the reality of battle. War poetry emerged as a genre during the remarkable outburst of inventiveness that occurred from 1914 to 1918. Upon the beginning of the war in 1914, several authors like Rupert Brooke, Laurence Binyon, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and many others engaged in the task of encouraging their fellow countrymen through their patriotic poetry. Their poetry focused on the themes of nationalism, the immortality of combatants, and the terrible events they experienced throughout the war. These soldier poets used their poems to challenge and oppose the heroic beliefs associated with war. Instead, they portrayed war as brutal and destructive, highlighting the uncertainty of the lives of soldiers (Kumar, 2020, p. 1721).

The Great War of 1914-18 had a significant impact on Poetry. It is remarkable for its cynicism, satire, and realism. The poets composed verses that extolled the magnificence of warfare, devotion to one's country, and triumph. Several individuals took part in the conflict and are hence recognized as military poets. These poets celebrated the virtue of selflessness and grandeur. They provide a sense of optimism and hope. Broke enthusiastically embraced war and composed exceptional sonnets about it. He saw war as a magnificent expedition and ultimately lost his life in combat. He observed the environment with keen perception and documented his observations with straightforwardness and precision. These combat poets exposed the atrocities and repulsiveness of battle, with Sassoon being recognized as the foremost military poet. Wilfred Owen, who died in the war in 1918, wrote 'Strange Meeting,' a profoundly sorrowful poem that stands out as the most emotionally charged piece of that era.

The conflict had caused a state of melancholy and a strong repulsion towards European culture (Chauhan, 2015, p. 636).

These soldier poets were actively engaged in combat at the front lines of the battlefield and living in the trenches. As the war kept going, it resulted in extensive devastation to the lives of combatants and people, as well as destruction of the natural environment and property. This was mostly attributed to the progress in the field of weapon technology, namely in the development of lethal weaponry. In addition to the weapons, the troops had the challenge of spending the majority of their time in the trenches, which were characterized by darkness and suffocating conditions. They were unable to sleep, as their nightmares were plagued by violence, terror, and sorrow for the deaths of their comrades in the military. As a result, they experienced significant psychological distress, including depression, and were subsequently admitted to military hospitals. It becomes evident that they were experiencing not just bodily but also emotional distress. Following their ordeal, the troops start documenting the harrowing and unforeseen encounters of the conflict. Their works illuminated the obscure and concealed truths of the conflict, historically completely unknown to the public (Kumar, 2020, p. 1722).

Iraq has had a turbulent history, marked by an eight-year war with Iran, prolonged international sanctions that led to severe famine, and another battle against terrorism that ended in the country's occupation and later sliding into civil conflict. Brian Turner, like Walt Whitman and Rudyard Kipling, is among the poets who have historically condemned war as a painful, bitter, detrimental, and destructive method that contributes to the erosion of the civilization of colonized countries. In their study entitled "The Construction of National Identity in Walt Whitman's 'Pioneers! O Pioneers!'", Saleh & Fadhil assert that war is a profoundly distressing encounter for individuals. They conclude that war is a sworn enemy for unity, as it possesses an imposing power that breaks nations into shattered entities (2019).

Jason Shaffer, in his article "An Education in Arms: Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*," observed that Turner's poems offer a wide range of lessons derived from the combination of weariness and dangerous circumstances that characterize life in a conflict zone. He regards conflict as a means of instruction. Turner's art captures the inescapable reality of death and the constant presence of danger in combat. Death permeates the atmosphere of *Here, Bullet*, making it impossible to avoid or escape. He considered combat as an effective means to understand how a soldier might save their own life and ensure their own recovery. Shaffer determined that Turner has approached war as a source of teaching:

"A student, absorbing not only the hard lessons of combat duty but also the language, history, and culture of Iraq. He also absorbs the strange nature of a war that began with a miraculously rapid invasion before developing into a grinding counterinsurgency, a transition that was already underway when Turner and his unit reported to Iraq for duty in 2003". (2012, p. 3)

Alani & Hassan indicate that Brian Turner's selected poems are a thought-provoking investigation of the intricacies of war, offering a perspective that opposes traditional storytelling methods. Through this lens, readers get insight into the human condition and the far-reaching effects of violent conflicts. Turner's work confronts the process of dehumanizing individuals that is often connected with war and encourages readers to critically examine the hidden motives and political strategies that influence these events (2024, p. 2). Hence, as noted by Mahmoud (2016), War Poetry is a literary genre that enables individuals who have experienced trauma to express their own experiences and communicate with others about the realistic stories of their painful experiences. Similar to World War I and II, these conflicts have served as a source of inspiration for numerous poets, whose works have played a major part in moulding our perception of the horrors of war.

2.2. Testimony In Literature

Literature is seen as a refuge by some individuals who have experienced trauma, providing them with comfort and relief. It functions as a means through which fragmented pictures, memories, and complicated and suppressed emotions find ways of expression to communicate with others. Art provides victims with an opportunity to reflect on their terrible experiences to understand them better and uncover the hidden truth behind the tragedies they have endured. It not only allows the opening up of painful experiences by those who have experienced trauma; but also empowers them to confront their traumas. This process helps in transcending inhibitions and repressed emotions; since facing a trauma allows for a deeper understanding and eventual comprehension of the incident. E. Ann Kaplan writes:

"Trauma can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnesses a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being 'translated' via art." (qtd. in Mahmoud, 2016, p.7)

Hence, literature could play a crucial part in the healing process of trauma caused by distressing situations. It helps individuals work through their suffering and transform it into something concrete and understandable, both for themselves and for others. In this scenario, those who have experienced violence and those who have survived use art not for art itself, but rather to express and address their pain.

Detue & Lacoste pointed out that Jean Norton Cru's 1929 analysis of First World War combatants' writings revealed diverse testimony practices, including diaries, reminiscences, reflections, letters, novels, poetry, and theatre. In the mid-twentieth century, a new literary genre emerged, known as "judicial act," written as a judicial testimony in diary form or memoirs after the fact. This form distinguishes itself by using a narrative pattern built around a legal deposition, a feature that distinguishes it from other forms of testimony (2021, p. 2). Givoni exposes how Cru, a former soldier, highlighted the significance of assessing war testimony based on their capacity to accurately depict a lived experience. He rejected exaggerated and mythical combat narratives and felt that the accuracy of information was the sole guarantee of the reliability of a witness. Diary notes and accounts produced by medical personnel were highly regarded due to their offering of significant psychological insights into the conflict (2011, p. 159). The term 'testimony' originated from the Latin root 'testis', which means "one who is present as a third party." In Roman law, the term "testis" included both the witness who was physically present during a legal transaction to authenticate it, as well as the witness who provided testimony in court (p. 155). The age of testimony began with World War I and reached its peak in humanitarian action and human rights activism after the end of the Cold War. The Great War led to a flood of veterans' writings, making testimony a collective phenomenon and a new literary genre (p. 158).

The First World War had a significant role in establishing testimony as a distinct genre. Several circumstances coincided to create an exceptional increase in testimony practices throughout this period. First and foremost, the profound consequences of increasing firepower, which resulted in new techniques for "waging war" and dying as a result, do not only give an explanation for this phenomenon. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that the impact of war on civilians was substantial, particularly considering that it occurred at a period when the general level of education was developed compared to earlier centuries. Moreover, the troops' lack of knowledge of the reality of warfare seemed even more "inconceivable" to them when they experienced it for the first time. The authors' motivation to write their stories stemmed from their astonishment at the unprecedented political violence, prompting them to disseminate this information to a wide audience (Detue & Lacoste, 2021, p. 2).

The emergence of separate social phenomena known as acts of testifying was dependent on the progress of a democratic culture, which began in the Western world throughout the

nineteenth century. However, the significant development of such attempts occurred in the following century, as a result of the wars of the world and the countless instances of genocides and crimes against humanity. These events compelled a large number of people to confront what Miguel Abensour referred to as "modern terror." (p. 1).

Testimony has been the central focus or the conceptual foundation for many books and articles in continental philosophy, cultural studies, literature, art theory, and history. This extensive body of writing has established witness as the revolutionary language used by oppressed and marginalised communities; and as the main means of expressing moral sensitivity towards victims of crimes. Although these works deserve recognition for explicitly addressing the ethical significance and consequences of testifying, they mostly saw testimony as a manifestation of a broader issue and did not extensively explore the specific nature of witnessing and testimony itself (Givoni, 2011, p. 147). Testimony serves as a medium for survivors of political violence, and those who have experienced trauma, to create and publish comprehensive testimonial narratives about the terrible events they have experienced to raise awareness about their experiences and recollections. The 21st century has been marked by several catastrophic events, particularly wars, and has shown a greater willingness towards individual testimonies "It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony" (Felman, 1995, p. 17).

The psychologist Sigmund Freud, as Mahmoud (2016) pointed out, firmly believes in the exceptional influence of words in the practice of psychotherapy. He states that magic and words were once the same, and even now they still possess a significant magical influence. Furthermore, he holds the belief that just conversation has the power to bring healing to anybody. Recognizing the crucial significance of verbal communication in psychotherapy, Joseph Breuer produced a therapeutic procedure known as the "talking cure" or "cathartic method." Both Freud and Breuer emphasize the significance of verbal communication and its "cathartic effect" in surmounting suppressed emotions. In order to fully understand and process a traumatic incident, which can only be accessed by the conscious mind via vivid recurring pictures in dreams and flashbacks, the person who has experienced trauma must convert these complex images and memories into spoken language (p. 5). Writing about trauma in this instance serves a dual purpose, both to provide evidence and for the purpose of healing. Herman maintains that "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." (Herman, 1992, p. 1).

Accordingly, literature can be considered a psychoanalytic device that allows traumatized individuals to re-externalize their traumatic experiences and achieve catharsis by releasing suppressed emotions. This process is essential for healing and reconnecting with society. The process of re-externalizing traumatic experiences and subsequently seizing trauma starts with the finding of words and the creation of a narrative concerning the events; transforming trauma into a structure of a language and storytelling serves as a means of putting coherence and order into the disordered experience (Mahmoud, 2016, p. 10).

Poetry is a kind of literature that enables those who have experienced trauma to express their own experiences and communicate with others about the harsh realities they have experienced. Similar to the impact of World War I and World War II, which served as inspiration for several poets and shaped our perceptions of the atrocities of war, the war on Iraq has also given rise to a significant number of poets who have expressed their opposition to the decision made by the U.S. government to wage this war (p. 4).

Patrick Hicks, (2015) conducted an interview entitled "The Soldiers Enter the House: An Interview with Brian Turner" with Brian Turner. The interview indicated how memory seems to be a crucial principle in Turner's artistic strategy; since it plays a significant part in revealing the truth behind his tendencies. This demonstrates that memory plays a vital part in the development of Turner's poetic style. Turner said that he is unable to experience these

events or situations without being taken back to the world of 1940 when the wind of the Second World War battered the whole world. Consequently, the notion of war is redefined as a method for a soldier to gain knowledge and understanding while exploring the culture and society of the country to which he is sent. The collection of the poetry might also be seen as an account that records significant historical occurrences. Turner stresses this point by highlighting the significance of memory, which he substantiates by recounting his personal experiences and documenting his moments as "one memory working against another memory".

2.3. Turner's Poetical Testimonies

Brian Turner is an American soldier and poet who served in Iraq during the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Turner's book, along with his educational poetry, is regarded as a significant achievement in American literature. Turner structured his book as a metaphorical journey across various locations in Iraq, spanning from the south to the north. These places not only serve as physical shelters; but also as cultural landscapes where he encounters new experiences and meets individuals who embody their culture. These people become characters and integral elements of the poems.

Literary works such as novels, essays, short stories, and poems were created as a consequence of the United States-led war in Afghanistan and, to a greater degree, the Second War of Iraq. Brian Turner, being recognized in modern poetry circles as a "rock star," distinguishes himself as the poet of the War of Iraq in his volumes, *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010). His writing has been likened to that of prominent war poets like Bruce Weigl, Wilfred Owen, Randall Jarrell, and Yusef Komunyakaa. In the early 2000s, Brian Turner, an American soldier and poet, was sent to Iraq. The poems explore several issues like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the soldier's everyday life in America after the war, his times in Iraq, and his continued brutality in the combat zone (Alani & Hassan, 2024, p. 2).

Some American veterans and soldiers provided testimonies on their first-hand experiences in Iraq, specifically recounting the encounters faced by soldiers on the battlefield. Their witnesses aim to expose the complete and genuine portrayal of the horrifying truth about the war on terror as experienced by soldiers. This stands in direct opposition to the carefully crafted narrative of the war on terrorism promoted by the U.S. mass media, which plays a substantial role in downplaying the severity of the Iraq War. Providing their testimony aims to disrupt the cultural legitimacy of the Iraq War. It is also considered an act of resistance against the war and its lasting effects, which some American soldiers have initiated, either within the U.S. military or upon returning home, to stop the war and express their shared suffering (Mahmoud, 2016, p. 12). Turner is an American soldier who expresses his battle experience using a form of testimony poetry. The following investigation into some of his poems demonstrates their function as his testimony of the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

Brian Turner's poem "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center," from his second 2010 collection *Phantom Noise*, represents a testimony of a fragmented pattern to convey the speaker's painful experiences he had during his military service in the US-led war against Iraq. The presence of PTSD is evident in the poem, specifically, the narrator is now firmly placed back in the United States. The poem presents an unexpected distinction between reality and nightmare. The speaker, who is not physically in Iraq now, has a sequence of memories triggered by sights and sounds at Lowe's Home Improvement store:

"Standing in aisle 16, the hammer and anchor aisle,
I bust a 50 pound box of double-headed nails
open by accident, their oily bright shanks
and diamond points like firing pins
from M-4s and M-16s.

In a steady stream
they pour onto the tile floor, constant as shells

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falling south of Baghdad last night, where Bosch
kneeled under the chain guns of helicopters
stationed above, their tracer-fire a synaptic geometry
of light.

At dawn, when the shelling stops,
hundreds of bandages will not be enough." (1-13) (Turner, 2010)

In the lines of the opening stanza of the poem above, Turner recounts a moment at a store for home improvement where it accidentally happened "Standing in aisle 16, the hammer and anchor aisle, \ I bust a 50 pound box of double-headed nails \ open by accident". This incident brings back a flood of memories related to his experiences in combat during his time in Iraq. The nails thereafter fell on the floor in a way that reminds him of the "firing pins/ from M-4s and M-16s". Yet, the term "bust" conveys a sense of purposefulness, and the description suggests that the speaker used significant force to open the box. The speaker seems to be deliberately revisiting old experiences to comprehend his current reality.

The dramatic opening of this box of nails evokes a resemblance not to the typical reality of a Lowe's home improvement shop, but rather to a container of ammunition intended for military use. The implication is that once these nails are utilized, the resulting damage will be so extensive that a mere, "hundreds of bandages will not be enough." This statement alludes to both the physical violence that took place on the real battlefields in Iraq, as well as the enduring mental distress and trauma that cannot be easily resolved. This seemingly inoffensive incident brings to the forefront a sequence of distressing events. Turner effectively emphasizes the enduring impact of emotionally significant experiences by presenting them as memories haunting an individual consciousness long after they have happened (Alsaden, 2013, p. 45). He continues:

"Bosch walks down aisle 16 now, in full combat gear,
improbable, worn out from fatigue, a rifle
slung at his side, his left hand guiding
a ten-year-old boy who sees what war is
and will never clear it from his head.
Here, Bosch says, Take care of him.
I'm going back in for more." (14-20)

Turner's poem seems to illustrate trauma by using a fragmented amalgam of actual events and memories. The poem continues with Turner's comrade in the second stanza, called "Bosch," who proceeds along aisle 16 at this moment, dressed in full fighting gear, unlikely, exhausted from extreme tiredness, a rifle hanging from his side, his left hand leading a little child of ten years who comprehends the reality of war and will never be able to erase it from his mind. He asks Turner "Here, Bosch says, Take care of him. \ I'm going back in for more." He writes in the last stanza:

"Aisle number 7 is a corridor of lights.
Each dead Iraqi walks amazed
by Tiffany posts and Bavarian pole lights.
Motion-activated incandescents switch on
as they pass by, reverent sentinels of light,
Fleur De Lis and Luminaire Mural Extérieur
welcoming them to Lowe's Home Improvement Center,
aisle number 7, where I stand in mute shock,
someone's arm cradled in my own.

The Iraqi boy beside me

reaches down to slide his fingertip in Retro Colonial Blue,
an interior latex, before writing
T, for Tourniquet, on my forehead." (52-64)

Turner's poem effectively conveys his horrific recollection by using fragmented and juxtaposed images to depict two distinct realities. The realistic world of The Lowe's Home Improvement Center where he stands in aisle number 7, and the world of traumatic memories of dead Iraqis passing by lighted passages. The last stanza confirms the very truth. Turner mentions that every dead Iraqi is astonished as he passes Tiffany advertisements and Bavarian streetlights. The incandescent lights are activated by motion and turn on when someone passes by. They serve as respectful guardians of light, namely the Fleur De Lis and Luminaire Mural Extérieur lights, which greet customers at Lowe's Center. Turner finds himself standing in aisle number 7, in a state of speechless surprise, with someone's arm resting in mine. The Iraqi youngster sitting next to him dips his finger into Retro Colonial Blue, an interior latex paint, and proceeds to inscribe the letter T, representing Tourniquet, on Turner's forehead. Thus, the poem is a true testimony of a contradiction between depictions of a painful experience and the speaker's current reality, emphasizing how trauma may intrude upon one's life. Turner unveils the curtains, revealing the harsh reality of battle to the global audience, and thus establishing himself as a highly recognized poet.

In his poem "Caravan," included in his 2005 collection *Here, Bullet*, Turner presents testimony of the continuous destruction of Iraqi land and waging war organized by political power. Turner offers a political critique of the United States' invasion of Iraq and expresses concern about the disregard for the victims of Iraq whose sacrifices seem to be futile. The opening words of the poem seek to establish a reconciliation with the people of Iraq. He reinforces their culture by using an old proverb from Iraq:

"No matter the barking of the dogs,
the caravan marches on.
—Old Iraqi Proverb
A long queue of container ships
stand at anchor in the Persian Gulf.
They carry .50 caliber machine guns
in packing grease, dunnage, ammo crates,
millions of bullets laid side by side,
toilet paper, insecticides, light bulbs.
The dockside floodlights hum
with mosquitoes and malaria. Cranes
hoist connexes onto flatbed trucks
which line Highway 1 from Kuwait City
to Dohuk in the north, just south of Turkey." (1-14) (Turner, 2005)

In lines (1-14), Turner vividly portrays the weapons of death and devastation that the dominant powers have brought to the Middle East. The tools are represented by the 'crates of death', which are filled with deadly weapons and ammunition, as well as essential household items for the troops' survival, such as large supplies of light bulbs, insecticides, and toilet paper. The trucks extend along the highway from Kuwait, south of Iraq, to Dohuk, up north. One may argue that these crates carried by the colonial soldiers represent more than just instruments of devastation and destruction. These boxes represent what is known as 'invasive species,' which are destructive to Iraq and cause harm to the indigenous environment. Furthermore, it contributes to the deformation of the Iraqi people's identity. Turner describes the Iraqi environment as destroyed, contaminated, and filled with "mosquitos" and "malaria." This is a definitive indication that the Iraqi population has suffered fatalities and been subjected to the

menace of widespread illnesses and severe hunger due to the invasion of American forces and the imposition of international economic sanctions. The colonial troops disregard these deteriorating circumstances in Iraq (Bahooty, 2022, p. 29). They are fully engaged in using the land and its natural resources to obtain economic gains and ensure their necessities. Turner continues:

"Try to imagine enough boxes of food
for one hundred and thirty thousand meals,
two to three times a day, for a year.
It is an army of commerce, a fleet
of corporations with the Pacific as its highway.
It is around-the-clock, and it is every day.
These are the boxes we bring to Iraq.
And Iraq?
Today, in Baghdad, a bomb
killed 47 and wounded over one hundred.
It left a crater 10 feet deep. The stunned
gathered body parts from the roadway
and collected them in cardboard boxes." (15-27)

In the previous lines (15-27) Turner depicts an image of thousands of food boxes as food support for the invasive troops sent by the American government. It is a hint for the ongoing of the destructive occupation of Iraq. Turner refers to the fact that the American army is "an army of commerce." While as a result of this invasive support, a bomb explosion resulted in the deaths of 47 civilians and caused injuries to over one hundred others, in Baghdad. The explosion created a cavity with a depth of 10 feet. The shocked individuals gathered dismembered body pieces off the road and placed them into cardboard boxes. Turner used visual images to convey the horrors of brutal death and devastation inflicted upon the people of Iraq and their invaded land. He depicts a sorrowful day in the lives of Iraqis that provokes feelings of pain and pity. He portrays two conflicting images: the first depiction is of the American soldier who is unable to sustain himself in his colony without modern weaponry, pesticides, and processed food produced in his homeland. These photos depict a life of consumerism and luxury. The second picture depicts an Iraqi man engaged in a life-or-death struggle, living through perilous insects, illnesses, explosives, and holes in the streets. He also examines the concepts of environmental destruction, specifically focusing on the massive damage inflicted on the Iraqi infrastructure. Turner alludes to the consistent relations between the subdued people of Iraq and their ruined land. Consequently, Iraqis have experienced humiliation and loss of power as a result of the centralization of power being connected to all fields of life in which they live and act. Turner writes:

"Imagine taping those boxes and shipping them
home, to Washington, D.C., to the White House lawn,
to bury them under the green sod thrown over,
box by box emptied into that rich soil
in silence, a Marine sentry standing guard
as boxes are lowered into the ground nearby
at the National Monument, Tomb of the Unknown,
our own land given to these, to say
if this is freedom, then we will share it." (28-36)

Turner highlights the injustice and disparity between American and Iraqi people in the previous lines (28-36). He also elucidates the growing disparity between the subjugated Iraqi

lands and United States developed lands, which are characterized by their green landscapes, stability, peacefulness, and plenty of valuable resources. Turner provokingly criticizes the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq and their disregard for the Iraqi victims whose lives are worthless. He advocates for an equitable relationship between American people and the Iraqi people. Disappointingly, Turner realizes that the United States would not show any concern for these victims. Dead individuals will not be taken to the "White House Lawn" for burial under the "green sod" and the "rich soil." Furthermore, the "Marines" will not guard these Iraqi victims near the "Tomb of the Unknown" at the "National Monument" due to the derogatory racial stereotypes associating Arabs with a lack of civilization or savagery. Turner ends his poem "Caravan," with covert satire. He says: "Our land was given to these, / to say if this is freedom, then we will share it." He invites the American people to actively engage in supporting the declared liberation of Iraqis by empathizing with their plight facilitating their rightful ownership of their homeland and paying honour to the victims of Iraq (Bahooty, 2022, p. 32). Therefore, "Caravan" serves as another testimony in which Turner cynically negates the allegations of justice and liberty brought by the United States to Iraq, urging the American people to empathize with the hardships endured by Iraqis and to share the sufferings of Iraqis.

Finally, the above analysis of Turner's poems "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and "Caravan" is bearing witness and giving true testimony built on real observations and experiences during his military service in Iraq. Trauma theorists, Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth; contend that the act of repeating or representing trauma can aid victims or witnesses in overcoming their traumatic experiences. By verbally recounting the trauma, they can bear witness to it for the first time. Therefore, the process of testifying to the occurrence, or in other words, representing what occurred, offers traumatized individuals the opportunity to consciously see or experience the event. By drawing on the observations and recuperative techniques of Freud and Breuer, Felman characterizes testimony as a means of access to truth, rather than just a form of declaration. To clarify, Ozoran, (2019) points out that trauma testimony refers to the process and experience of gradually and finally comprehending the reality of a horrific occurrence. Testimony confrontation is a process in which the individual actively engages with and accepts the incident, rather than just repeating it passively in words (p. 32). Throughout writing poetry, Turner finds a means to present a testimony of a traumatic experience to humanity from one side; and finds it therapeutic during exposition of the atrocities committed by the US occupation of Iraq from the other side. Such a thing reveals the very truth adopted by trauma theorists.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, several American troops and veterans express the realities of their terrible experiences via various creative mediums, aiming to reveal the horrifying facts they have encountered during wars. Through bearing testimony of their sufferings, individuals also resist suppression by governmental or cultural mechanisms and inspire readers to become eyewitnesses themselves to this unjust war and its atrocities, to alter present policies and prevent future conflicts. These survivor soldiers and veterans use literature, like war poetry, as a kind of documentation and a means to express their testimony.

Through his poetical testimony, Turner used various strategies in his poems to condemn the violent American war, confirming its illegitimacy in his works. He exposed the imperial expansion of the U.S. forces and refuted the US government's justification for defending human values like democracy, liberty, and justice in Iraq. He declares that the occupation is the primary cause of the declining state of Iraq's moral, social, political, and ecological circumstances.

Turner's selected poems in this study, "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" and "Caravan" reveal and articulate the ugly truth of the hidden reality of war. They explore how writing poetry acts as a means of recovery from trauma and as a method of bearing witness and giving testimony of the devastation and negative effects resulting from the recent war in Iraq.

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Through his poetry, he vividly recreates and reenacts the traumatic ordeal of war, specifically the psychological horrors endured by American soldiers in Iraq. Hence, this study is a substantial academic document that makes a meaningful contribution to understanding Turner's war poetry through the lens of testimony.

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