

*Wandering the Streets of “Baghdad”: Space,  
Representation, and the Colonial Present*

by

Wesley Attewell

B.A. (hon.), The University of British Columbia, 2007

M.A., The University of British Columbia, 2009

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## ***Abstract***

In this thesis, I will explore the triangular relationship between space, representational practices, and the colonial present. I will grapple with a few key research questions: how do we, as Westerners, represent the “other”? How, in turn, do we represent “ourselves”? How have these representational practices shaped the conduct of the War on Terror? And finally, how are (neo)colonial struggles over the politics of representation intricately bound up with questions of geography?

By focusing my attention upon the recent invasion, and subsequent occupation of Iraq, I hope to offer a historico-geographically responsible, as well as anti-essentialist, reading of three distinct “digital spaces”: two blogs (Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning* and Colby Buzzell’s *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*) and Multi-National Force Iraq’s YouTube channel.

Here, I will argue that, to paraphrase Edward Said, broader geographical struggles, over forms, over images, and over imaginings are not only being dispersed around the globe, they are also being fractured and subsequently contested on a more micro-scale in these new digital battlegrounds. As I hope to demonstrate over the course of this thesis, social media websites such as blogs and YouTube must be conceptualized not only as political, but also as *antipolitical* spaces, in that they both encourage *and* stifle critical debate on issues pertaining to late modern warfare. Furthermore, the discursive dimensions of geographical struggle must be brought into (vexed) relation with its material dimensions (i.e., armies moving across space), and it is the mutually constitutive nature of this relationship that I will emphasize in this thesis: in other words, the conduct of late modern warfare is not only influenced by, but also influences, the deployment of representational practices.

Ultimately, I argue that the increasing importance of the so-called “social media” (i.e., blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) as digital spaces of (anti?)politics enables us, as critical human geographers, to produce a genuinely human geography, and to think about space, the body, and representational practices in very different ways.

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*Dedication*

*To Lisa*

## *A Prince's Geography*

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above”<sup>1</sup>.

This thesis has its origin in one particular set of interconnected questions. They are not unique or revolutionary questions by any stretch of the imagination, but, as I hope to demonstrate, they have acquired a new relevance in light of recent events, particularly the initiation of the global “War on Terror” by the former President of the United States, George W. Bush.

The questions themselves are deceptively simple: how do we, as Westerners, represent the “other”? How, in turn, do we represent ourselves? How are colonial struggles over the politics of representation intricately bound up with issues of geography? These are the questions that Edward Said was grappling with in his path breaking study of *Orientalism*; that provoked Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to ask “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; that drove Timothy Mitchell to think about the modern world as though it were an exhibition. These are the questions that have inspired a whole generation of so-called “post-colonial” scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives to both highlight, and excoriate, the chains that bind the colonial past to the colonial present: or, to paraphrase Marx, to think about the ways in which the “traditions of all the dead generations” weigh “like a nightmare on the brain of the living”<sup>2</sup>. Although the field of post-colonial studies is as rich as it is diverse, some have argued that, at least in recent years, it may have lost its ability to speak clearly about the questions that led to its formation in the first place. Indeed, as Spivak points out:

“Postcolonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame. Colonial discourse studies, when they concentrate only on the representation of the colonized or the matter of the colonies, can sometimes serve the production of current neocolonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past, and/or by suggesting a continuous line from that past to our present. This situation complicates the fact that postcolonial/colonial discourse studies is becoming a substantial subdisciplinary ghetto”<sup>3</sup>.

I am sympathetic to these concerns, and by introducing my thesis in this manner, I place my own research within a particular constellation of scholarly knowledge. As yet another human



geographer referencing Said, Spivak, and Mitchell, one might argue that I have laid down the logic of the analysis to follow. Given my disciplinary background, I will read Said, Spivak, and Mitchell in a way that highlights their geographical sensibilities. Imagined geographies, of course, will be of central importance to my thesis. I will further flesh out what Sparke calls the “shadow of a geographical pattern” in Spivak’s work on grammatology and subalternity and I will also demonstrate the tight connections between Mitchell’s “world-as-exhibition” and the production of late modern geographical knowledge<sup>4</sup>. To some extent, this is all true, as my work is deeply influenced not only by these three, but also by other scholars of what Mbembe calls the “postcolony”<sup>5</sup>. But, as Gregory points out, theory, if understood as a creative and imaginative sort of self-reflexivity, can not only be dynamic, but enabling<sup>6</sup>. For me, Said, Spivak and Mitchell represent not the finish line, but rather, the starting point and thus, in the course of this thesis, I hope to use their insights in order to say something productive about the connections between space, representational practices, and the colonial present.

First, I think scholars broadly involved in the field of post-colonial studies need to take geography much more seriously. Let me begin this discussion by foregrounding one of the difficulties that I have had to deal with on a more or less consistent basis while both researching and writing this thesis. This difficulty stems from another deceptively simple question that is often asked in social settings both inside and outside of the university: “What kind of research are you doing for your graduate degree?” No matter what kind of geographical spin I try to put on my answer, it invariably leads to a second, much more provocative question: “How is this research geographical?” To be fair, many of the people who ask me this question are unaware of the disciplinary cleavages within geography itself: the separation and the hammering together of human geography and physical geography, for instance. Even if I explain to them that human geography is concerned with “the spatial differentiation and organization of human activity and its interrelationships with the physical environment”, it remains difficult for them to understand how the study of representational practices is geographical in any way, shape, or form<sup>7</sup>.

As I write this introduction to my thesis and reflect upon the various times that I have been asked this challenging question, I am reminded of the encounter in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* between the prince and a geographer on the sixth planet. During this encounter, the little prince is told that a geographer, “c’est un savant qui connaît où se trouvent les mers, les fleuves, les villes, les montagnes, et les déserts”<sup>8</sup>. For the little prince, this is practical knowledge,

produced by a real profession, and yet, to his disappointment, the geographer is unable to reveal the location of these natural landmarks on his own planet. As the geographer explains, he is not an explorer:

“Je manque absolument d’explorateurs. Ce n’est pas la géographie qui va faire compte des villes, des fleuves, des montagnes, des mers, des océans, et des déserts. Le géographie *est trop important pour flâner*. Il ne quitte pas son bureau. Mais il y reçoit les explorateurs. Il les interroge, et il prend en note leurs souvenirs. Et si les souvenirs de l’un d’entre eux lui paraissent intéressants, le géographe fait faire une enquête sur la moralité de l’explorateur”<sup>9</sup>.

Apparently, the moral character of the explorer is important because if they tell lies, they bring into disrepute the geographer’s books. What is interesting about this particular passage in Saint-Exupéry’s masterwork is not the fact that geography is reduced to simply knowing the *locations* of mountains, of oceans, of rivers, of cities etc., but rather, that the sole purpose of the geographer, who does not leave his desk, is simply to *record* geographical knowledge. Geographical knowledge is, in fact, *produced* by explorers. Driver has already deconstructed the relationship between exploration, colonialism, and geography, and thus, there is no need to explore the finer details of this claim here<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, I think that Saint-Exupéry’s description of geography is, to a certain extent, how the discipline is perceived both inside and outside the academy. Geographers, however, are not necessarily explorers either. We cannot simply reverse the claims made by Saint-Exupéry’s geographer without misreading one of the broader themes of the novella: that the world of adulthood is one that, more often than not, lacks imagination. Note, for instance, that both geographers and explorers are intimately concerned with truth and practicality: geographers simply record locations on maps, and sober explorers of the highest moral character only traffic in truths.

Maps, however, are but representations: as Harley points out, their claim to a singular *Truth* is impossible to substantiate<sup>11</sup>. And if Mitchell is correct when he argues that the spatialization of modernity (or more specifically, colonial modernity) ushered in the age of the world-as-exhibition, where the European preoccupation with “the organization of the view” meant that the so-called “real world” became “conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition”, a space where one encountered not reality, but only “further models and representations of the real”, then it follows that geography itself cannot be conceptualized as the exact science practiced by Saint-Exupéry’s geographer<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, many scholars outside the discipline of geography have long

recognized the analytical importance of the spatial. Foucault, for instance, suggests that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power”, and as such, geography “necessarily lies at the heart of [his] concerns”: it acts as the support, the condition of possibility for the “passage between a series of factories that [he tries] to relate”<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, Jameson, argues that a “model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as a fundamental organizing concern”<sup>14</sup>. As it turns out, both Foucault and Jameson were particularly interested in the ways in which representational practices are used often used to order the world, to break it down and render it legible for common consumption. The paintings of Diego Vélazquez, the writings of Cervantes and Borges, and the poetry of Mallarmé all helped Foucault trace the outline of what he called the modern “order of things”, while references to literature, to high art, to architecture, to film, and to video thread through Jameson’s masterwork on the cultural logic of late capitalism, allowing him to draw connections between spatialization, the arts, and mediatization<sup>15</sup>. Even Harvey’s attempt to outline the geographies of a post-modern space economy draws inspiration from representational practices: some scholars have even suggested that the illustration used for the cover of *The Condition of Postmodernity* can “be made to illuminate its political and intellectual genealogy in a number of different ways”. Indeed, as Harvey himself points out:

“Postmodernity, it is said, is about fiction rather than function. But it is about a certain kind of fiction, in which quite disparate worlds collide and intermingle, in which time and space collapse in on each other, to produce a flat landscape in which anything goes and all voices are treated as equal. [Madelan Vriesendorp’s *Dream of Liberty*], out of the postmodernist stable, illustrates these theories with clarity and precision”<sup>16</sup>.

This is, I think, a fascinating summation of the project of postmodernity. This passage in particular resonates in some ways with my own project and as a result, I hope to return to it shortly. Before moving on, however, I wish to point out that it is the works of Edward Said that most succinctly highlight the connections between geographical struggle and representational practices. His work on imagined geographies has inspired a whole generation of critical scholars to interrogate the ways in which we, as Westerners, represent our “Other”, and in this regard, I, too, owe Edward Said an enormous intellectual debt. But it is this passage, taken from *Culture and Imperialism* that perhaps most clearly speaks to what I have in mind:

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and

cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings”<sup>17</sup>.

What Said is suggesting, in effect, is that human experience is ultimately grounded in geography. To paraphrase Marx, men may make history, but humans make geography<sup>18</sup>. When Said speaks of geographical struggle, I think that he is referring to the ways in which we shape space and place in accordance with our own individual, as well as collective, desires and needs. More often than not, these needs are highly incompatible. Whatever George W. Bush’s justification for the invasion, and subsequent occupation of Iraqi space, it was clearly not well received by vast sections of the general population: hence, the so-called “insurgency”. And although the insurgency represented an attempt to slow down, to counter, or even to undermine the brute spatial logics of the American war machine, Said also notes that geographical struggle is intricately bound up with ideas, forms, images, and imaginings. This is a particularly powerful quote and it has, in its own way, inspired a whole new generation of critical scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. In less than careful hands, however, I think that it runs the risk of being misinterpreted. Said was not suggesting that we examine representational practices in isolation from the soldiers and the cannons, and thus, I plan to bring them both into (vexed) relation. Nowhere has this triangulation of geography, warfare, and representational practices been more obvious than in the former Bush administration’s “War on Terror”, especially when the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 is taken into account.

In this thesis, I will think critically about the ways in which the nature of Said’s “geographical struggle” has shifted over time. Certainly when Said was writing *Orientalism*, the acts of writing and representing bespoke privilege. This was, of course, Said’s point: that the coloured, feminized “Orientals” were almost invariably represented by European males. Even for that privileged signifier of postcolonial scholarship, the third world woman writer of colour, it was quite difficult to escape the inevitable associations between the act of writing and socio-cultural privilege<sup>19</sup>. However, particularly when one takes into account the increasing popularity (and seductiveness) of the Internet, it seems to me that, if nothing else, nodes of articulation within broader networks of power are rapidly multiplying. Even 10 years ago, the vastness of the real world out there was represented to us in small chunks by the television, the newspapers, and the political sound bites. Nowadays, however, we are surrounded by blogs, forums, listserves, YouTube videos, Internet Relay Chat, Really Simple Syndication, Twitter updates, Facebook profiles, and Myspace pages. Let us consider, for instance, the rise of the blog as a medium of

both personal and political expression. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a blog (listed under “weblog”) as a “frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary”<sup>20</sup>. According to David Sifry, as of 2006, his company, Technocrati, was tracking more than 57 million active blogs, with nearly 3 million blogs created monthly during the third quarter of 2006, while blog posts are being made approximately 54 000 times an hour. In 2008, these numbers were even bigger: 184 million people started blogging, 364 million people (or 77% of active internet users) read blogs, 95% of the top 100 newspapers have reporter blogs, 37% of bloggers have been quoted by the mainstream media, and 1 million blog posts are being written every day. Blogs, as a “global phenomenon that has hit the mainstream”, have even begun to influence traditional media outlets, such that companies like Technocrati are now beginning to wax lyrical about the so-called “Active Blogosphere”: or, “the ecosystem of interconnected communities of bloggers and readers at the convergence of journalism and conversation”<sup>21</sup>. I believe that, to paraphrase Said, broader geographical struggles are now not only being dispersed around the globe, they are also being fractured and subsequently contested on a more micro-scale in new battlegrounds such as blogs.

While reading these reports, I could not help notice that these numbers were being spun in ways that were reminding me of Harvey’s description of the postmodern project. One might argue that in the “Active Blogosphere”, “quite disparate worlds collide and intermingle, in which time and space collapse in on each other, to produce a flat landscape in which anything goes and all voices are treated as equal”. Has the internet successfully democratized access to the tools of representation? I believe that it would be very difficult for anyone to substantiate this claim. Representation, even on the Internet, is a practice that remains ensconced within broader networks of power, governed, as it were, by the unequal grammars of discursive exchange and the Internet is no exception. There is the simple, basic, material fact that to even start a blog in the first place, you need enough disposable income to be able to afford first a suitable personal computer, and second, a monthly Internet subscription: as of 2009, out of a total population of approximately 6.789 billion, only approximately 1.669 billion people around the globe (approximately 24 percent) are using the Internet. Based upon these figures, one might argue that the percentage of the global population that participates in the production of “news” can only expand. However, it must be pointed out that not everyone will be able to participate in this expanded production (i.e., more rich people than poor people, more denizens of the Global North

than the Global South, more youth than elderly, etc.), necessarily influencing (and perhaps, even constraining) the specific forms of democratization that blogs are helping to produce<sup>22</sup>. Thus, as I hope to demonstrate later on in the first and second chapters of this thesis, despite the apparent anonymity of the Internet, questions of speaking, of voice, and of positionality still remain important, often in ways that we, as Westerners, simply cannot even begin to imagine. Why, for instance, is it so difficult for us to believe that a young Iraqi woman could maintain an intelligent English language blog in a war-torn country? Why is it so easy for others to believe, in turn, that this same Iraqi woman can speak on behalf of an entire nation? Why does an eloquent, if disgruntled, U.S. soldier blogging out of Iraq immediately acquire a position at *Esquire* magazine after his (dis?)honourable discharge from the army (nobody, to my knowledge, has offered Riverbend a job!)? Why is it that websites such as YouTube often exaggerate, rather than eliminate, stereotypical performances of gender identity? These questions highlight the extent to which the act of representation still, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, suggest its ongoing connections to privilege and authority.

Why are these developments important for critical human geography? As Saint-Exupéry's geographer would have it, are there now more explorers? This may be true, and yet, I do not believe that all of the recent developments that I have outlined above should be understood in this manner. First, we are dealing with geographical imaginations that are both much broader in scope, and yet, also intensely personal and localized. The emergence of the blogosphere provides a fantastic opportunity to see how the imaginative geographies of Orientalism, for instance, diffuse through networks of articulation/power, and are subsequently reworked at all geographical scales. Second, because of the relative "anonymity" of the Internet and the relative ease with which "voices" (for lack of a better term) are appropriated by others, self-reflexivity and suspicions of capital T truths become an even more important part of careful and responsible scholarship. And finally, blogs force us, as human geographers, to think about the ways in which late modern warfare is fought on multiple, complexly differentiated registers. Representational practices do more than simply enable the killing of the "other". Rather, they structure warfare, and organize it. They dictate how war will be conducted: what kind of killing will be taking place, how targets will be conceptualized, what kind of strategies and tactics will be utilized, etc. For instance, how do representational practices undergird particular logics of targeting that transform living, breathing cities into a simple collection of objects to be bombed? How, in turn, does this conceptualization of cities allow military leaders to subscribe to the fiction that aerial

bombing can be clean, surgical, and precise? How does the urban battlespace become “enframed” in multiple, differentiated ways? It is too easily forgotten, I think, that representation is of crucial importance to the conduct of late modern warfare, not just before and after, but *during* combat as well.

This is not the time or place to attempt a rigorous, sustained, and detailed analysis of the tight connections between representational practices and space. What follows, however, is an analysis of three diagnostic moments of these processes, through which I hope to tentatively trace the shifting geographical imaginations of the colonial present. I will focus my attention upon one of the major theatres of the “War on Terror”: Iraq. However, I must point out that Operation Iraqi Freedom is a constantly moving target. Over time, what began as the “simple”, unilateral invasion of one nation state by another mutated into something completely different. It would also be incorrect to suggest that this transformation has been a linear process: although one could arguably create a simplistic timeline, breaking Operation Iraqi Freedom down into three or four distinct stages (invasion in 2003, occupation and insurgency from late 2003 to early 2008, and withdrawal from 2008 onwards), such a reductionism does not even begin to capture the nuances and the complexities of the different dimensions of the conflict. For instance, it glosses over the highly dynamic and volatile political geographies of post-invasion Iraq; it pins the conflict down to precise co-ordinates in both time and space; it elides the considerable shifts in the American war machine’s approach to the slipperiness and messiness of the conflict. Given the nature of this thesis, it is imperative that I provide a historical-geographical context for my analysis, and thus, I must attempt to briefly situate the conflict in both time and space.

Operation Iraqi Freedom began in earnest on 19 March, 2003, at approximately six o’clock in the morning (zero hour, in military parlance) when President George W. Bush ordered two F117-A stealth fighters to attack the Dora Farms complex in south-central Baghdad with cruise missiles and smart bombs in the hope of killing the Iraqi “Ace of Spades”, Saddam Hussein<sup>23</sup>. By May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, Bush declared the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* under a giant “Mission Accomplished” banner. Unfortunately for Bush, the real battle for Iraq was, in fact, just getting started, and in response to the mounting insurgency and the intensifying, micro-scale ethno-sectarian violence sweeping through not only Baghdad, but also throughout the “Sunni Triangle” located just northwest of Iraq’s capital, Bush ordered the deployment of an additional 20,000 troops in January of 2007 (otherwise known as the

“Surge”)<sup>24</sup>. Unfortunately for Bush, such measures proved insufficient, and with the election of President Barack Obama in November 2008, the end, as they say, is ostensibly now in sight: by 31 August, 2010, all combat units are to be pulled out of Iraq, while the remaining 50,000 troops tasked with training Iraqi forces, supporting the Iraqi government, and engaging in counter-terrorism operations will be gone by the end of 2011. However, the War on Terror is far from over, as many of the troops in Iraq are going to be re-deployed in Afghanistan, where the “situation is deteriorating fast, with the Taliban gaining control over large swathes of territory”<sup>25</sup>. For the purposes of this paper, however, Obama’s decision to keep one of his key election promises marks the “beginning of the end of the U.S. occupation” in Iraq<sup>26</sup>.

This summary of Operation Iraqi Freedom is necessarily, even embarrassingly crude. It is not my project to explore the intricate details of the nuanced and complexly differentiated political geographies of post-invasion Iraq. But it occurs to me, even as I (re)write this introduction, that Operation Iraqi Freedom itself needs to be situated within a far broader context: a broader re-conceptualization of what it means to conduct a war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Writing in 1995, Admiral William A. Owens argued that what we are seeing in the aftermath of the First Gulf War is nothing less than a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA). According to Owens, this particular revolution has its origins in the “inspired” interaction of several different technological innovations. In his own words:

“Most senior and civilian leaders agree that the specific technologies are those that allow us to gather, process, and fuse information on a large geographical area in real time, all the time; that allow us to transfer that information – call it knowledge – to our forces with accuracy and speed; and that provide us the capacity to use force with speed, accuracy, precision, and great effect over long distances... We have decided to build what some of us call the *system of systems*; namely, interactions that will give us *dominant battlespace knowledge and the ability to take full military advantage of it*”<sup>27</sup>.

Although this might sound like an idea that has been pulled out of the *Terminator* movies (i.e., Skynet), what Owens and others involved in the RMA are trying to do is essentially “take down” Carl Von Clausewitz, the 19<sup>th</sup> century military theorist, who, in the treatise *Vom Kriege* (or, in English, *On War*), argued that “the great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently – like the effect of fog or moonshine – gives to things exaggerated dimensions and



unnatural appearance”<sup>27</sup>. Owens is careful to note that the architects of the RMA have never claimed to be able to completely get rid of the so-called “fog of war”, and yet, they also argue that the “revolution can introduce such a disparity in the extent to which fog and friction apply to each side in war as to give one unprecedented dominance”<sup>29</sup>.

But how does one go about putting into a practice such a dynamic revolution in military affairs? According to Mike Davis, the architects of the RMA wish to model the new Pentagon and U.S. military after the mega-corporation, Walmart (or “Warmart”, to use Davis’ terminology). For the revolutionaries, easy parallels could be drawn between Walmart’s decision to transform itself into a “self-synchronized distributed network with real-time transactional awareness”:

“Instead of depending on hardcopy orders and ponderous chains of command, [mobile military actors] would establish ‘virtual collaborations’ (regardless of service branch) to concentrate overpowering violence on precisely delineated targets. Command structures would be ‘flattened’ to a handful of generals, assisted by computerized decision-making aides, in egalitarian dialogue with their ‘shooters’”<sup>30</sup>.

Davis places the term “shooters” in scare quotes in order to highlight the ways in which the Second Gulf War has ushered in an era of high tech weaponry that serve to distance and insulate soldiers from their targets. Not only has aerial bombardment played an increasingly crucial role in late modern warfare, but the development of high-technology, “smart” weaponry has called into question the utility of requiring “shooters” to be within visual range of their targets. Thus, during the invasion of Iraq, cities such as Baghdad were assaulted by endless waves of cruise missiles launched from American aircraft carriers stationed in the Persian Gulf, while high flying bombers dropped “smart” bombs that accurately locked onto targets in order to “surgically” destroy enemy forces. In this way, the risks associated with urban combat would be reduced considerably, thus making it easier for American forces to secure cities such as Baghdad. As Ajiz Ahmad puts it: “what the Americans want is that by the time their Marines walk into [Baghdad], the city of five or six million will have become a city of corpses and ghosts”<sup>31</sup>. This dominance of Iraqi airspace by American forces is maintained on a daily basis not only by helicopters and fighter jets, but also by one of the poster children of Owen’s RMA, General Atomics’ MQ-9 Reaper/Hunter Predator drone, a “long endurance”, “medium altitude” unmanned aircraft that can be used for surveillance and reconnaissance missions. By using synthetic aperture radar, video cameras, and infrared technology, surveillance imagery can be

generated by the MQ-9, which can then be transmitted worldwide almost instantaneously via satellite communication links. The MQ-9 can also be remotely ordered to engage targets: it has an operational ceiling of approximately 50,000 feet, an internal payload of 800 lbs., and an external payload of 3,000 lbs., which means that it can carry up to four Hellfire II anti-armor missiles, two laser guided GPS bombs, and 500 lbs. of GDU-38 joint direct attack munitions<sup>32</sup>.

As an example of the “marvels”, as well as the “limits” of modern military technology, the Predator drone has been sensationalized by the media. Robert Kaplan, writing for *Atlantic Monthly*, flew to Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada, where, on a tour led by Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Clamp, he is told that “Pred” missions are being flown out of innocuous, camouflaged military trailers. For Kaplan, the Predator drone crystallizes Walmart’s ability to triumph over the tyranny of geography. What makes the Predator drone a particularly “impressive” piece of military hardware, however, is its ability to fly slow and hover over the urban battlespace, conferring upon its pilots an improved “situational awareness”, allowing them to “understand the local facts on the ground” without being seen or heard by their targets<sup>33</sup>. Thus, the Predator drone embodies the Petangon’s desire to “concentrate overpowering violence upon precisely delineated targets” and then, takes it one step further. By being able to actualize violence in Iraq and Afghanistan from a trailer located almost halfway around the globe, the MQ-9 allows its pilots to kill someone without ever putting themselves in danger. The experience of flying an MQ-9 cannot even be compared to that of playing a video game, for its crews do not even get the sensation of flying that one experiences in a flight simulator. Instead, a complex, three dimensional urban terrain becomes reduced to a string of mathematical functions and algorithms, map displays, black and white photographs, and video feeds on multiple computer screens. Here, Baghdad, Iraq, or Kabul, Afghanistan become enframed: Predator pilots are able to “see the view”, to observe and gaze at Iraqis and Afghanis going about their daily business from a distance without having to contemplate the very real consequences of their “presence”<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, the Predator’s sensory apparatus is able to provide close up shots of targets under surveillance in such precise detail that pilots can even look into people’s houses and see a “guy walk into the courtyard at night to take a crap, registered by the heat picked up on the ground after he gets up from a squat”<sup>35</sup>.

If the Pentagon had its way, the general population of the US would believe that the Iraq war was carried out by an entire army of Predator drones. Ever since the Dora Farms complex was

bombed, the Pentagon has found itself hard at work, constantly selling Operation Iraqi Freedom as a technologically driven, overpowering, precise, quick, clean, low risk, and as much as possible, a distanced conflict. President Bush summarized these ideas most succinctly in his “Mission Accomplished” speech:

“Operation Iraqi Freedom was carried out with a combination of *precision, and speed, and boldness that the enemy did not expect*. From *distant* bases or ships at sea, we sent planes and missiles that could destroy an enemy division, or strike a single bunker. Marines and soldiers charged to Baghdad across 350 miles of hostile ground in one of the swiftest advances of heavy arms in history. You have shown the world the skill and might of the American Armed Forces”<sup>36</sup>.

American soldiers would not be occupiers; they would simply be humanitarians with guns, tasked with spreading the noble ideas of democracy, liberty, and self-determination throughout the Arab world. Paradoxically, it seems to me, the success of the former could only be guaranteed by the truth of the latter: peace and democracy could only be secured precisely because of the mobilization of a nearly indescribably military force, the likes of which the world had never seen before<sup>37</sup>. It is this paradox that would constantly undermine the Pentagon’s elaborate fiction throughout the course of the war.

Each chapter of my thesis deals with a distinct moment of Operation Iraq Freedom. My first two chapters focus upon Technocrati’s “Active Blogosphere”. Here, I provide a careful, critical, and above all, responsible reading of two blogs. The first, *Bagdad Burning*, was written by a young Iraqi woman named Riverbend, who chronicles her day-to-day experiences of living in occupied Baghdad from August 2003 to October 2007. The second, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, is the brainchild of Colby Buzzell, a U.S. soldier completing a tour of duty in the Middle East and focuses the events that transpired in Mosul in the summer of 2004. Along the way, my research on war blogs has been guided by a few crucial questions: How can we situate bloggers in both space and time? How are their narratives ensconced within both gendered and racialized networks of power? How do they trace (and more often than not, resist) the complexly differentiated topologies of the colonial present? And finally, what can we, as human geographers, learn from their creative work? In these two chapters, I argue that both bloggers reject the Pentagon’s own geographical imaginations in favour of something much more nuanced and elusive; that their narratives can help human geographers chart the differential locations, the time-space manifolds, and the “multiple, compound, and contradictory subject positions” that are

made available by the spatialization of colonial (post?)modernity<sup>38</sup>. In my final chapter, I venture outside of the blogosphere in order to analyze the 45 video clips that have been uploaded to the YouTube channel created by Multi-National Force Iraq (MNFI). MNFI began uploading these video clips in 2007, a time when the U.S. public began to seriously question the benefits of maintaining a combat presence in Iraq. Although I am interested in Christensen's claim that the MNFIRAQ channel was set up by the U.S. Department of Defense in order to "stop the posting of damaging material by coalition troops", and thus, adheres to "traditional" norms of propaganda by attempting to represent Operation Iraqi Freedom as a "clean" war and U.S. soldiers as humanitarian defenders of democracy and freedom, I argue that this reading glosses over the interactivity of a website such as YouTube, where users are given the opportunity to respond in real time to uploaded clips either in video or textual format<sup>39</sup>. By taking into account the comments and the response clips, we can begin to think critically about a much broader question: how do online websites, such as YouTube or blogs, necessarily reconfigure how we, as human geographers, conceptualize the "space of the political"<sup>40</sup>?

***“Every Iraqi’s Nightmare”***

“A little about myself: I’m female, Iraqi, and 24. I survived the war. That’s all you need to know. It’s all that matters these days anyways”<sup>1</sup>.

On 2 May, 2003, President George W. Bush delivered a speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* that he no doubt believed would decisively mark the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq. His message was direct and unequivocal:

“Admiral Kelly, Captain Card, officers and sailors of the USS Abraham Lincoln, my fellow Americans: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the Battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed....the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free”<sup>2</sup>.

Unfortunately for Bush, he would never be able to live up to his own hype: the “mission” in Iraq, at least in the eyes of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the rest of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) would never be “accomplished. And if Bush’s speech is remembered for his inability to gauge the enormity of the task that lay before the occupying army, it should also be remembered for its theatrical, spectacular, “made-for-television” braggadocio: in addition to delivering under an enormous “Mission Accomplished” banner, Bush also wore a flight suit and flew to the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on a navy jet, even taking over the controls for a short period of time<sup>3</sup>.

Bush’s speech forces us to think critically and carefully about the ways in which the media, mainstream or otherwise, has become such an important component of the late modern battlefield that in some ways, war itself has become a performance, or perhaps, even an exhibition<sup>4</sup>. Scholarly analyses of the media, however, have been surprisingly reluctant to keep up with the dynamism of the broad range of material at their disposal, focusing instead upon more traditional sources of information and entertainment, such as television and analog print media. Until very recently, however, the increasing importance of the so-called “social media” remained underappreciated by both popular and academic commentators alike<sup>5</sup>. Blogs, in particular, have become one of the “dangerous new weapons” being deployed in conflict zones around the globe, such as Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq<sup>6</sup>. As the War on Terror runs its course, there has been a substantial explosion in the number of warblogs that are being updated at any given moment in time. Written and updated in real time by Iraqi civilians struggling to

come to terms with the geographies of the colonial present, or by American soldiers trying to convey a sense of what it means to be a part of an occupying power, war blogs are much more than online diaries. Rather, it is *interactivity* that is the defining feature of the blog experience. E-mailing, commenting, referencing, hyper-linking, embedding: these are all activities that take place in real time, giving war blogs, to use Hunt's terminology, an intrinsic freshness and immediacy<sup>7</sup>. Although Hunt juxtaposes blogs and so-called "standard issue new reports", it is important to point out that there is nothing inherently oppositional about the blogosphere anymore, in that it is a space that has been rapidly colonized by professionals. Although the mainstream media has increasingly turned to blogging as an effective means of not only distributing, but also gathering, information, other institutions have become interested in the medium of the blog: not only does the U.S. army maintain its own official blog, but it also has its own private channel on YouTube (MNFIRAQ) where it uploads short video clips that can be accessed around the world<sup>8</sup>.

It is precisely because of this colonization of the blogosphere that blogging, like writing, must be analyzed as a practice must be situated within broader networks of historical-geographies<sup>9</sup>. In order to sharpen this point, I will be focusing my attention upon a particular member of the Iraqi blogging community: Riverbend, "author" of *Baghdad Burning*. From Sunday, August 17, 2003 to Monday, October 22, 2007, Riverbend anonymously updated her blog on a more or less regular basis, chronicling her day-to-day experiences of living in occupied Baghdad. I will argue that it is important to problematize the relationship between Riverbend and "the material that defines her and her creative work", and to highlight the extent to which blogging "weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender", of history and geography<sup>10</sup>. Thus, I will focus my attention upon two key questions. First, what kinds of political and ideological claims have been legitimized by the failure to situate Riverbend in both time and space? And second, how has the (neo)colonial occupation of Iraq reconfigured Riverbend's own geographical imaginations? Along the way, I hope to demonstrate how Riverbend can help us understand the city of Baghdad as a palimpsest composed of multiple overlapping geographies; how the prosecution of late modern warfare both ruptures and (re)inscribes our experience of both space and time<sup>11</sup>.

“No Voice...”

In one of her entries, Riverbend writes: “I’ve lost my voice. *That’s not a metaphor for anything, by the way.* I’ve managed to literally lose my voice...And that’s why blogging is a wonderful thing right now: it gives *voice to the temporarily voiceless*”<sup>12</sup>. This statement is interesting, because it invites us to read it against the grain and ask two important questions: How is Riverbend represented? Who does she represent? Riverbend’s narrative, I think, is genealogical; it disrupts, displaces, and undermines the powerful story of colonial modernity<sup>13</sup>. This does not mean that we should hold up *Baghdad Burning* as an example of an alternative vision of post-colonial modernity, for such a maneuver leaves undisturbed the West’s exclusive claim to act of writing history. Rather, we must begin by thinking critically about the ways in which the production of the colonial modern involves creating an effect we recognize as reality by organizing the world endlessly to represent it; about the ways in which colonial modernity is staged as a representation. For Mitchell, representation does not only refer to the production and dissemination of images and meanings, but at a more fundamental level, to “forms of social practice that set up in the architecture and the lived experience of the world what seems an absolute distinction between image and reality, and thus, a distinctive imagination of the real”<sup>14</sup>. In this paper, I will attempt to undermine this distinction by acknowledging the ways in which representation “is the key to how we imagine the construction of modern selfhood”, whereby, under the influence of the mass media, subjectivity comes to be “understood as something fashioned by staging one’s life as a story, in a continuous representation of oneself to oneself and to others”<sup>15</sup>. This, in turn, will require close attention to the instability of Riverbend’s own geographical imaginations.

Let us consider, for a moment, the marketing campaign that accompanied the publication of Riverbend’s blog by CUNY Feminist Press in 2005<sup>16</sup>. Here is what the Feminist Press had to say on the back cover of *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq (Vol. I and II)*: “In August 2003, *the world* gained access to a remarkable new voice: a blog written by a 25-year-old Iraqi woman living in Baghdad”; she has “thousands of loyal readers worldwide”, as her blog is not only “widely recognized around the world as a crucial source of information not available through the mainstream media”, but it is also “first-rate reading for any American who suspects that Fox News may not be telling the whole story”. This is significant, because, as the feminist publication *Ms. Magazine* points out, “Iraqi women’s voices have been virtually silent since the

fall of Baghdad”. As “the only Iraqi blogger writing from a woman’s perspective”, Riverbend thus becomes a “native informant”, that historical individual who must be excavated, retrieved, celebrated, and made accessible to a Western audience. Much of this marketing tacitly endorses the notion that the oppressed, “if given the chance...and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics...*can speak and know their conditions*”<sup>17</sup>. However, as Spivak famously declared, the subaltern cannot speak<sup>18</sup>. To paraphrase Marx, the subaltern cannot represent herself; she must always be represented, both culturally as well as politically. Spivak’s work has been controversial. Her detractors, such as Terry Eagleton, have accused her prose of being inaccessibly obscurantist, and compared her critique of post-colonial to a “gaudy supermarket”, where any “eclectic...idea can apparently be permutated with any other”<sup>19</sup>. Her supporters, such as Judith Butler, accuse of Eagleton of essentially being jealous of Spivak’s influence and of advocating for a “death of thought”: not only is the “difficulty of [Spivak’s] work...fresh air when read against the truisms which, now fully commodified as ‘radical theory’, pass as critical thinking”, but the terrain that she traverses in her work is so messy and complex that original thinking on these matters is necessarily going to be equally messy, complex, and challenging<sup>20</sup>. These polemics are certainly entertaining to read, and I think both of them have something worthwhile to say about Spivak’s broader project. I am sympathetic with Spivak’s attempts to deconstruct the relationship between the economy, culture, history, and philosophy, and I certainly subscribe to the notion that tropes of “voice” and “speech” and “subjectivity” need to be situated and positioned within complexly differentiated networks of global power. However, Spivak herself has reformulated her initial claim that the “subaltern cannot speak” several times, making it worthwhile, even necessary, to tentatively think through some of the ways in which the social media, such as blogs, are reconfiguring, in some very powerful ways, the politics of speech and subalternity in the colonial present<sup>21</sup>.

First, Riverbend cannot be responsibly made to speak for all Iraqis, as her very positionality and subjectivity renders this maneuver impossible. As readers of her blog, we slowly learn personal information about her: we know, for example, that she is a member of a large, ethnically mixed upper middle class family; that she worked as a computer programmer before the invasion of Iraq; that she learned how to speak English by reading foreign books. And as Shahdid points out, the average cost of an Internet subscription in Baghdad is approximately \$250 a year, a figure which is approximately 50 times the average monthly income of an ordinary Iraqi citizen<sup>22</sup>. These basic facts highlight the situatedness of Riverbend’s knowledge. They also



foreground the limits and instabilities of geographical imaginations. At the beginning of 2004, Riverbend wrote a blog entry critiquing plans to split Iraq along ethnic lines:

“We all lived together before – *we* can live together in the future. Iraqis are proud of their different ethnicities, but in the end, *we all identify ourselves as ‘Iraqi’*. Every Iraqi’s nightmare is to wake up one morning and find Iraq split into several parts based on ethnicity or religion. [Salam Pax] said it best when he said ‘there are no lines and none should exist’...”<sup>23</sup>.

Riverbend’s critique simply replaces one generalization of the Iraqi population with another, and in so doing, she is curiously unable to accept the possibility of discrepant historical geographies. Even as she argues against processes of territorial fragmentation in her blog, Riverbend’s own vision of Iraq as a nation is premised upon the same exclusionary principles, only in reverse: those who do not agree with her politics are deemed to be foreigners, or simply not true Iraqis. Iraq, she argues, has been a land of dreams for everyone *except Iraqis*. There is, for instance, the Persian/Iranian dream of a Shi’a controlled Islamic state; the pan-Arab nationalist dream of absorbing Iraq into a broader united Arab region; the American dream of using Iraq as a beachhead from which the ideals of “freedom”, “democracy”, and the “market” will spread throughout the region; the Kurdish dream of carving out an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq<sup>24</sup>. This highly particular conceptualization of Iraq as a “land of stolen dreams” is a narrative thread that holds her blog together, consistently emerging in different blog posts on pertinent political topics. Consider, for instance, her discussion of the potential formation of “Kurdistan”:

“What is it that the Kurds can get in an independent ‘Kurdistan’ that they can’t get in a democratic, united Iraq? Some would say that they had complete rights even before the war. There were tens of thousands of Kurds living in Baghdad. In fact, some of Baghdad’s most affluent families prior to the occupation were Kurdish families”<sup>25</sup>.

Some commentators might take Riverbend to task for her casual and ambivalent use of the term “complete rights” in this passage, particularly when one takes into consideration the poison gas attacks that took place on March 16, 1988, where Saddam Hussein’s forces used mustard gas, nerve agents, and other chemical weapons against the mainly Kurdish town of Halabja, killing almost 5,000 people in a single day<sup>26</sup>. However, what is much more interesting about this (and other similar) blog entry is Riverbend’s delineation of a discursive space of national belonging; her mobilization of an imaginative geography to distinguish inside from outside, Iraqi from non-Iraqi, same from different. In Riverbend’s discussions of the splitting of Iraq, blame is almost

always placed upon outsiders, specifically America (for invading Iraq) and Iran (they “seem to be the only gainer”)<sup>27</sup>. She blogs quite frequently about the ways in which clerics with ties to Iran, such as the Ayatollah Kadhimi al-Haeri or the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, are influencing the Iraqi masses in order to secure political power in the new Iraq<sup>28</sup>. According to Riverbend, the fact that an Iran-influenced Shi’a religious list led by al-Sistani came out on top in the 2006 general elections speaks volumes about the extent to which Iranian clerics have “had a strong hold right from 2003”, when “their militias were almost instantly incorporated into the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense as soon as a move was made to create new Iraqi security forces”<sup>29</sup>. She writes: “Today, [Iranians] rule the country. Over the duration of three years, and through the use of vicious militias, assassinations, and abductions, they’ve managed to install themselves firmly in the Green Zone...no one dares to talk about the role Iran is planning in the country”<sup>30</sup>. When Riverbend argues that the “various pro-American, pro-Iranian Iraqi governments are failures”, imaginative geographies are being mobilized: they are failures *because* they are pro-Iranian, because they are run by people who are not Iraqi<sup>31</sup>. To be fair, however, Riverbend’s views are not idiosyncratic. According to Salam Pax, the “Baghdad Blogger”, recent public displays of affection between the leaders of Iraq and Iran, such as the fact that an “Iranian Arts and Culture Festival” is being held at the National Theatre and Arts Palace in Baghdad, are making a lot of Iraqis, especially Sunnis, “very nervous”. Simply by walking down a main street in Baghdad, Salam was able to find posters protesting the recent turn of events: according to these posters, “Iranian (art) exhibitions are aimed to distort Iraq’s identity”, “Iranian culture is an axe poised to crush Iraq’s cultural identity”, and “Iran is spreading ideas to stop the unity of Iraq’s people and land”<sup>32</sup>. Even top American generals, such as Ray Odierno, have started to complain about Iran’s “interfering” in Iraq, by training insurgents and paying surrogates<sup>33</sup>.

However, only six months later, Riverbend is forced to acknowledge the messy complexities of urban public space, as well as the potential capacity of post-invasion Baghdad’s increasingly dynamic social and cultural geographies to offend, to disturb, and to challenge. For example, when describing the Shi’a ritual known as Latimiya, she notes:

“Many moderate Shi’a frown upon the process of beating oneself with chains because the sight of it is just so...terrible...E. and I watched from the rooftop a couple of days ago as a procession of about 50 black-clad men passed down the main road. It was frightening...They were beating their chests to a certain beat and chanting something incoherent. These processions were banned

before, and quite frankly, I wish they could be confined to certain areas now. The sight of so much violence (even if it is towards oneself) is just a little bit unnerving...I don't like the ritual"<sup>34</sup>.

Although some commentators have suggested that Riverbend is being hypocritical here, particularly as she is always keen to emphasize the mixed Sunni-Shi'a heritage of her family, such a reading seems superficial to me, for it ignores the ways in which this passage highlights the tight connections between representational practices and imaginative geographies<sup>35</sup>. Here, the Shi'a are partitioned into two distinct, and yet related groups: the normal moderates who are quiet, cultured, and respectful, and the incoherent fundamentalists who practice unnerving rituals. By suggesting that there should be a geographical separation between these two groups, one might argue that Riverbend is effectively calling for a folding of *distance into difference* through a series of spatializations: in other words, she is mobilizing her own imaginative geographies in order to make sense of the rapidly changing world in which she finds herself<sup>36</sup>.

Riverbend is thus not a "subaltern" in the traditional sense of the term. Spivak herself has acknowledged that one cannot simply equate being post-colonial or a member of an ethnic minority with subalternity, and that rather, the term should be "staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of [women's] muting by heterogeneous circumstances"<sup>37</sup>. However, Spivak glosses, despite her awareness of questions of context and of responsibility, over the geographical component of "muting by heterogeneous circumstances". Although she identifies a "shadow of a geographical pattern" in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, a careful consideration of geography is surprisingly absent in her critique of postcolonial reason. If the native informant has typically been foreclosed by the "philosophical presuppositions, the "historical excavations", and the "literary and cultural representations" of the dominant, she has also been silenced by *space*<sup>38</sup>. Giddens once made the ontological claim that, contra Marx, "people make not only histories but also geographies, that time-space relations are not incidental to the constitution of societies and the conduct of social life"<sup>39</sup>. Although Giddens' claim strongly resonates with my own geographical sensibilities, it must also be pointed out that people do not make these geographies "just as they please", but rather, "under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past"<sup>40</sup>. In the second section of this paper, I will show how Riverbend's geographical footprint is inevitably constrained by the global networks of power relations within which she, through no fault of her own, remains ensconced (i.e., American imperialism, British colonialism, global patriarchy, the new international division of labour,

etc.). For now, however, I simply wish to open up the concept of subalternity in order to highlight its slippery complexities. In her discussion of Sabrine Al-Janabi, a young Sunni woman who was gang-raped by three officers of the Shiite dominated state police in 2007, Riverbend grapples with the difficulties of “speaking out”<sup>41</sup>. Aihwa Ong argues that “ordinary women telling their tales transnationally – in the double sense of talking about border-crossing lives and the transnational dissemination of tales – *should form a counterpoint to hegemonic narratives*”. She suggests that feminists can become a channel for the voices of postcolonial women, “creating opportunities for them to interrupt and intervene in metropolitan circuits of gender and cultural theory”<sup>42</sup>. Spivak, I think, would echo this call. And yet, I am struck by the fact that Riverbend did not begin blogging because CUNY Feminist Press asked her to: she began blogging because she wanted to. Both Riverbend and Sabrine Al-Janabi have spoken *in some way*. They have inserted themselves into hegemonic circuits of potentially alternative discursive power without the help of Ong’s “feminist channel”: Riverbend blogs, while Al-Janabi risks death and agrees to be interviewed by Al Jazeera. For Riverbend, Al-Janabi is a woman to be admired:

“She might just be the bravest Iraqi woman ever. Every knows American forces and Iraqi security forces are raping women (and men), but this is possibly *the first woman* who publicly comes out and tells about it *using her actual name*. Hearing her tell her story physically makes my heart ache. *Some people will call her a liar*. Others (including pro-war Iraqis) will call her a prostitute – shame on you in advance”<sup>43</sup>.

Here, Riverbend is reflecting upon her own positionality, her decision to remain anonymous while blogging. But, perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this paper, Riverbend (and by extension, Al-Janabi) highlight the difficulty of isolating a unitary subaltern subject position: they speak not as subalterns who know (or do not know) their condition, but rather, as ordinary human beings who have been forced to come to terms with their respective subject positions on a daily basis by the horrors of late modern warfare.

But if Riverbend has decided to “speak”, what geographies of trust does she mobilize in order to get us to “listen”? First, she is doubly accessible to her Western audience, in that she not only blogs in English, but she also references and critiques sources that are accessible to us, such as the *New York Times*. Second, she highlights her direct experience of Baghdad as a conflict zone. Although sections of her blog do deal with the violence of the colonial occupation, the majority

of it describes the more mundane experiences of living in a city ravaged by late modern warfare: for instance, getting potable drinking water, acquiring a reliable generator to compensate for a failing electrical grid, dealing with traffic jams and shortages of gasoline, sleeping in the middle of open firefights, etc. In the end, these two maneuvers are complementary, in that the first strengthens the second. If we accept her analysis of news sources that *we* read and find credible, then it becomes much easier to believe the other components of her blog narrative. This does not mean that her authenticity goes unchallenged. Some of her critics have accused of her of being a fraud simply because she blogs in English and knows how to use the Internet, while one even set up a fake *Baghdad Burning* blog at riverSbend.blogspot.com, complete with backdated posts, purposefully misspelled words, and atrocious grammar<sup>44</sup>. The fake blog was not up for long, as the impostor (a retired Republican military veteran named Troy) was quickly hunted down and exposed by other bloggers acting on behalf of Riverbend. According to those who exposed it, the fake blog was “obviously inauthentic”: it was a “shabby, poorly cobbled together collection of material plagiarised from various foreign sources...*it is not a blog by any true definition*”<sup>45</sup>.

However what might these “true definitions” consist of? Here, I am reminded of Riverbend’s wish that “every person who emails me supporting the war, *safe behind their computer, secure in their narrow mind and fixed views could actually come and experience the war live*”<sup>46</sup>.

Elsewhere, Riverbend blogs about a relative who had recently come home from London: “He was in a state of...shock at what he saw around him. Every few minutes he would get up in disbelief, trailing off in mid-sentence, to stand in the window – looking out at the garden like he could see beyond the garden wall and into the streets of Baghdad. ‘We watch it on television over there...but its nothing like *this*’<sup>47</sup>. Originally, I had thought that Riverbend’s point was clear: one must experience war live in order to understand its consequences. Now I am not so sure. This is not to deny the force of Riverbend’s account: rather, it is to suggest that its power derives not only from her ability to describe the mundane, everyday geographies of occupation, but also from her (counter)voice, and her persistent demands for accountability. Put another way, it seems to me that any celebration of *Baghdad Burning* for its “(auto)ethnographic authority” not only misses the point, but is also inherently problematic<sup>48</sup>. Riverbend cannot be everywhere, and as such, necessarily relies upon secondary sources and other eyewitnesses accounts when blogging about areas of Iraq outside of Baghdad (or even outside of her own neighbourhood). What this means is that *Baghdad Burning* is not a typically linear account of the invasion and occupation of Iraq: it is “real time” in the sense that she writes an entry and

then posts it (even this becomes complicated due to potential gaps in between the completion of a post and its publication on her blog), but her writing incorporates other references and hence, multiple temporalities. If Riverbend is not always “there”, she is not always “in time” either. Furthermore, both Pratt and Buzard consider works of autoethnography to be an “inauthentic” form of self-representation, in the sense that “no single member of a culture automatically [commands] a view of every part or could understand every role performed in that culture from within”<sup>49</sup>.

Here, it is worth pausing for a moment in order to think critically about the purchase of this concept of “authenticity”: can a text ever be authentic? What does the term *even mean*? Mitchell argues that there is no representation of the real that perfectly mirrors that elusive world outside of the exhibition, and in this sense, it might be much more useful academically, conceptually, and politically, to read *Baghdad Burning* not as a text that highlights some kind of capital T truth about the realities of post-invasion Iraq, but rather, as a narrative that has been carefully, even lovingly, crafted and constructed. I think that part of what makes *Baghdad Burning* such a powerful indictment of the colonial present is that Riverbend’s “mundane” experiences, when they are not punctuated by the violence of invasion and occupation, are highly relatable. Some of her readers ended up becoming so invested in *Baghdad Burning* that, after more than one updating hiatus, they emailed her repeatedly in order to *make sure that she was still alive*<sup>50</sup>. In November of 2003, she even set up a sister blog entitled *Is Something Burning* in order to post recipes for traditional Arab dishes such as tepsi baytinjian, eggplant and labna, date balls, kabab iroog, lentil soup, to name only a few. Although most of her readership was highly appreciative of her efforts, some accused of posting thoroughly “un-American” recipes. For instance, on 16 November, 2003, a deeply troubled American emailed her the following:

“Is your recipe [for summag salad] just an evil trick? A way to poison Americans? That could be inferred. Sumac is highly poisonous! You said: ‘Sumac is a deep reddish spice that is tangy and grainy’. From the page you linked: English = Shumac, Sicilian sumac ‘The closely related New World genus *Toxicodendron* contains only plants that...are highly toxic’. In Iraq, YOU may be eating the safe spice, but in the “New World”...the variation of the plant that grows there is poisonous!”<sup>51</sup>.

“Disgusted” however, did not properly do his or her research and as Riverbend guessed correctly, the spice, which is derived from the non-poisonous berries of the plant, is perfectly

safe to consume, as it is sold in grocery stores across the “New World”. What is particularly interesting to me about this passage, however, is that it highlights the ways in which even the most mundane components of Riverbend’s narrative (i.e., providing recipes to food) can be interpreted as evil lies and tricks. Exchanges like this cannot be ignored, as they speak to the continued banality of Orientalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

Bearing all of this in mind, what are we left with? First, I think, is a recognition of the importance of developing “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology”<sup>52</sup>. It is my contention that, as human geographers, we can only begin to appreciate the complexly and partially differentiated topologies of the colonial present that are highlighted in *Baghdad Burning* if we situate Riverbend in the multiple spatio-temporalities of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Failure to do so inevitably results in a smoothed, written over geography of colonial occupation. Thus, in the concluding section, I will read *Baghdad Burning* first and foremost as a text of geography. In so doing, I hope not only to expose Baghdad as a complex geographical palimpsest which is in danger of being over-written by one singular and supposedly coherent geography, but I also hope to highlight the ways in which different spatial processes ultimately end up “muting” Riverbend by forcing her to stop blogging.

### *Haunted Urbanisms*

The spatialization of colonial modernity has traditionally been understood as a process that is driven by the logic of partition<sup>53</sup>. For Fanon, the colonial city is a city divided into two: the colonial sector, which is “permanently full of good things”, and the “native sector”, a world “with no space, where people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together”, where death is ubiquitous. This spatial “order of things” is not only produced and maintained by a hyper violent governmentality which has nothing less as its aim than the total destruction of the indigenous social fabric, it also creates a situation where violence becomes commonplace as *the* problem solving tool for both colonizer and colonized<sup>54</sup>. Here, I will do two things. First, I will examine the ways in which Riverbend complicates this spatial logic. What *Baghdad Burning* makes clear is the fact that these processes of partitioning urban space are not static, but rather, are highly dynamic and mobile. In occupied Baghdad, the boundaries between colonizer and colonized blur and bleed; they extend and retreat both horizontally and

vertically across space and through time; they overlap and layer in space; they highlight the topological, as opposed to the geometrical, nature of colonial occupation. Second, I will suggest that these “dynamics of territorial fragmentation” mute Riverbend’s (counter)voice by simply making it impossible to remain in a city whose geographies have been so fundamentally altered by colonial violence that she finds herself becoming increasingly excluded from the spaces that she used to call home.

In entry written on July 11, 2006, Riverbend argues that it is no longer possible to think of Baghdad as one city. As she writes:

“It’s like Baghdad is no longer one city, it’s a dozen different smaller cities, each infected with its own form of violence. It’s gotten so bad that I dread sleeping because the morning always brings so much bad news. The television shows the images and the radio stations broadcast it. The newspapers show images of corpses and angry words jump out at you from their pages, ‘civil war...death...killing...bombing...rape...’<sup>55</sup>.

Here, Riverbend’s claim is framed by a specific historico-geographical context: namely, the intensifying violence of the so-called Iraqi insurgency on the one hand and the increasing permanence of the supposedly temporary American occupation on the other. However, Riverbend was blogging about the “infection” of urban space with violence long before July 11, 2006. By piecing together various blog entries, Riverbend’s readers can map onto Baghdad’s geographic grids an ever-expanding network of what I call “haunted” urban space. In his work on ghostly cities, Steve Pile argues that urban spaces are haunted by memories of the past. By walking through the city, he suggests, urban dwellers not only travel across space, but also through time. As he puts it: “cities are places with innumerable pasts – tragic, traumatic, or otherwise – co-exist...each ghost, all ghosts, speak to the co-existence of these different events, each with its own temporalities running through it”<sup>56</sup>. While retaining Pile’s interest in the work of historical memory, my own use of the term “haunted space”, inspired by Riverbend’s poignant description of the Amiriyah massacre that occurred during the First Iraq War, refers specifically to the ways in which memories of death and (neo)colonial violence are concretized in urban space. On February 13, 1991, precision guided bombs were used by U.S.-led coalition forces during Operation Desert Storm in order to destroy the Amiriyah bunker, located in the middle of Baghdad. According to a White House report, the bunker was a legitimate military target: although it had originally been built to act as a bomb shelter during the Iran-Iraq war, it was later turned into a camouflaged military communications centre, surrounded by barbed wire



and patrolled by armed guards<sup>57</sup>. However, in the aftermath of the assault, the Iraqi government reported that a total of 300 civilians were killed as a result of the bombing. How is this blurring of civilian and military space to be accounted for? According to Riverbend, although February 12, 1991 marked one of the days of “Eid Al-Fitr”, a holiday of considerable importance to Iraq’s Muslim population, it is also remembered as one of the heaviest days of bombing during the Gulf War. During times of heavy bombardment, bomb shelters would act as make-shift community centers: “Iraqis don’t go to shelters for safety reasons so much as for social reasons...there’s water, electricity, and a feeling of serenity and safety that is provided as much by the solid structure as by the congregation of smiling friends and family”<sup>58</sup>. Thus, on February 12, it was decided by the families in Amiriyah that they would take refuge in the bomb shelter and celebrate the “Eid Al-Fitr” dinner at the same time, after which the men and boys over the age of 15 would leave and give the women and children some “privacy”. However, according to Riverbend, these illusions of safety were shattered as the first of two smart bombs ripped through the ventilation shaft of the Amiriyah shelter, and blasted through the roof of the first floor. The second missile arrived shortly after to finish the job, turning the facility into an “inferno”: those who did not “burn to death immediately or die from the impact of the explosions, boiled to death or were simmered in the 900+° F heat”<sup>59</sup>.

It is in neighbourhoods like Amiriyah, once respectable, diverse, and middle class, where the bloody consequences of (neo)colonial violence become memorialized in space. For Riverbend, the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq has produced an ever increasing number of neighbourhoods like Amiriyah. In her blog, she speaks of the “one with the crater where the missile exploded”, “the street with the ravaged houses”, and the “little house next to the one where the family was killed”, to name only a few examples<sup>60</sup>. On the surface, it seems as if Baghdad has become a “counter-city”, with its complexities by the prosecution of late modern warfare to a simple dualism of life and death. But in war-torn Baghdad, life and death bleed together, a process which is facilitated by the work of memory. Mbembe argues that the spatialization of (neo)colonial occupation leads to the creation of “death worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead”. Riverbend’s description of her visit to the Amiriyah shelter highlights the role that memory plays in reproducing that permanent condition of “being in pain” that is characteristic of existence in a death world, thus concertizing Mbembe’s undead metaphor<sup>61</sup>. She is told by a local child that the shelter is *maskoon*, a Arabic word which can

either mean “lived in” or “haunted”. At first, memories of death and violence are invoked by the hundreds of pictures of smiling women and children that adorn the walls of the shelter. But it is not until a survivor of the attack points to the “vague ghosts of bodies stuck to the concrete on the walls and ground” that Riverbend begins to appreciate the double meaning of term haunted. Amiriyah is not only haunted by the memories of the dead: it is also haunted by the ghosts of the living, cursed with their own survival<sup>62</sup>. What Riverbend’s blog makes clear is that spaces also haunt. As Gordillo points out, what makes memories significant is not necessarily their temporal coordinates, but rather, the geographies that they evoke<sup>63</sup>. For the survivors of the “liberation” of Iraq, memories, almost without exception, evoke the imaginative geographies of the colonial present.

Here, we arrive at the crux of Riverbend’s challenge. How can one make tangible this connection between space and memory? How can one fully convey the horrors of late modern warfare to a target readership that will most likely be situated within a completely different set of historical geographies? In order to counter the imaginative geographies mobilized by the American war machine, she must offer to her readership a re-representation of the war; she must tell a counter-story, construct a counter-narrative. However, it rapidly becomes clear that she finds it extremely difficult to describe the consequences and the horrors of late modern warfare in her blog, thus highlighting the intimate connection between the destruction of a city and the ruin of language<sup>64</sup>. For example, in the Amiriyah shelter, Riverbend is directly confronted by perhaps the ultimate example of Mbembe’s “permanent condition of being in pain”. Riverbend blogs: “the words [corpse outlines] to look at was that of a mother, holding a child to her breast, like she was trying to protect it or save it...’That should have been me...’ the woman who lost her children said, and *we didn’t know what to answer*”<sup>65</sup>. However, these processes are also occurring on a more mundane level. For instance, when describing a “road trip” that she took with some of her family members to get gasoline, Riverbend blogs that she does not even “know” the city anymore<sup>66</sup>. For Riverbend, post-invasion Baghdad has become a city where proper names have lost all meaning as areas increasingly become identified by the acts of violence that take place within their boundaries.

Reading *Baghdad Burning*, it rapidly becomes clear that late modern urban warfare highlights the ways in which colonial spaces, violent spaces, dead spaces, military spaces, family spaces, state spaces, insurgent spaces, and carceral spaces all jostle and intermingle, thus bringing into

sharp focus the complexities of waging war in urban space. If Bhabha and Derrida are correct to suggest that terror and space can be linked via etymology, then I think that it is important to think carefully about the ways in which “haunted space”, in addition to being saturated with the memories of past violence, is also characterized by a constant threat of future conflict<sup>67</sup>. Late modern war amplifies this sense of threat in two ways. First, the Pentagon’s plan to “shock and aw” the Iraqi population into submission via the deployment of its high-tech arsenal of weaponry (laser guided smart bombs, networked GPS battle systems, long range cruise missiles, etc.), a strategy clearly undergirded by Donald Rumsfeld’s dream of a highly networked American war machine would prove to be incapable of fulfilling its goal of “leaving a small battlefield footprint”<sup>68</sup>. Once a city becomes transformed into a simple collection of targets via GPS, remote sensors, plans, and blueprints, it consequently becomes very difficult to see how urban life is so intertwined with the space of battle: to see, for instance, how the power plants that provide the so-called “terrorists” with the necessary resources to create home-made nitrogen bombs also sustain life for ordinary Iraqis. As Riverbend points out, it is impossible to be “clean”, “surgical”, or “precise” with missiles and bombs no matter how technologically advanced they are, particularly as many of the cities under attack, such as Sumarrah or Baghdad, are incredibly dense, filled with small, shabby houses separated by narrow streets<sup>69</sup>. The upshot of this is that the fuzzing of civilian and battle space epitomized by the bombing of the Amiriyah shelter in 1991 continued to take place on a regular basis during the second “liberation” of Iraq in 2003. Riverbend covers one particularly notorious incident in a post entitled “En Kint Tedri...”. A couple of days before May 22, 2004, 40 people celebrating a wedding were gunned down by an American attack helicopter in Western Iraq. In a press release, the Pentagon argued that the wedding guests were actually anti-coalition forces, as they were shooting kalashnikovs into the air<sup>70</sup>. For Riverbend, this was pure propaganda:

“Of course not – it couldn't have been a wedding party. It was a resistance cell of women and children...It wasn't a wedding party *just as mosques and hospitals are never mosques and hospitals when they are bombed*. Celebrating women and children are not civilians. ‘Contractors’ travelling with the American army to torture and kill Iraqis ARE civilians. CIA personnel are ‘civilians’ and the people who planned and executed the war are all civilians. We’re not civilians – we are insurgents, criminals, and potential collateral damage”<sup>71</sup>.

What Riverbend is describing here goes beyond semantic instability. Rather, what is being flagged in this (and other similar) blog entries is a systematic refusal on the part of the American

war machine to acknowledge any legitimate and meaningful connection between the terms “Iraqi” and “civilian”. As Derrida points out, we “must always recognize strategies and relations of force”, for it is always the dominant power that “manages to impose, and thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize...on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus, the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation”<sup>72</sup>. This sort of disingenuous discursive manipulation has very real and material consequences: once you have decided *a priori* that it is extremely difficult to make rapid, split-second decisions regarding the differences between friends and enemies in a war zone, it subsequently becomes impossible to conceptualize the urban battle space in such a way that permits the waging of clean and surgical warfare. As I will demonstrate later on in this thesis, it is much easier for soldiers to simply shoot first, and ask questions later.

Indeed, the rising “Iraq body count” suggests that, even in the present, there is something fundamentally problematic about the way in which the urban battlespace is being approached, conceptualized, and managed<sup>73</sup>. For many American soldiers, successfully completing a tour of duty in Iraq (in other words, returning home alive) means trusting no one: as they learn in pre-deployment training centers, “civilians” can easily turn into enemies in the blink of an eye<sup>74</sup>. Indeed, the U.S. military’s fear of the increasing verticality of urban combat was given one of its most prominent vocalizations by Ralph Peters, who suggests that it “undermines the awareness and killing power that high-tech sensors give to US combatants in the urban battlefield”<sup>75</sup>. For Peters, the megacities of the Third World were spaces where “mankind is rotting”; they are “killing grounds and reservoirs for humanity’s surplus and discards (*guess where we will fight*)”<sup>76</sup>. Although pre-invasion Baghdad was hardly a “megacity of the Third World”, Iraqi military leaders, such as Tariq Aziz, Saddam’s foreign minister, were clearly aware of these debates, and took the analogy one step further in Autumn of 2002, by suggesting that “some people say to me that the Iraqis are not the Vietnamese! They have no jungles or swamps to hide in. I reply, ‘let our cities be our swamps and our buildings our jungles’”<sup>77</sup>. Despite the Pentagon’s best attempts to break Arab cities down into their component parts in order to render them legible, familiar, and above all predictable, they remained a dangerous “kill zone” to coalition forces on the ground. Here is milblogger Colby Buzzell describing part of a clash that took place between coalition forces and insurgents on August 4, 2004 in the northern city of Mosul:

“We were driving down Route Tampa when all of the sudden all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys, edge of buildings, out of windows, everywhere, just came out of fucking

nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPGS were flying at us from every single fucking direction...I freaked the fuck out and ducked down into the hatch and I yelled over the radio, 'HOLY SHIT! WE GOT FUCKING HAJJIS ALL OVER THE FUCKIN' PLACE!!! They're all over goddammit!!!!...my entire platoon was being ambushed. *We were stuck in the middle of a kill zone*'<sup>78</sup>.

Here, the city becomes a space of pressing and immediate danger. Its streets, rooftops, alleys, buildings, windows, and doorways become perfect places where insurgents can hide and ambush unsuspecting coalition forces. It becomes transformed into a “kill zone” filled with “fucking hajjis” who seem to emerge out of nowhere from *everywhere*. Even Riverbend recognizes the dangers of the streets:

“Most of the gangs, at least the ones in Baghdad, originate from slums on the outskirts of the city. 'Al-Sadr City' is a huge, notorious slum with a population of around 1.5 million. The whole place is terrifying. If you lose a car or a person, you will most likely find them there. Every alley is controlled by a different gang and weapons are sold in the streets...they'll even try out that machine-gun you have your eye on, if you pay enough. Americans don't bother raiding the houses in areas like that...raids are exclusively for decent people who can't shoot back or attack. Raids are for the poor people in Ramadi, Ba'aquba, and Mosul”<sup>79</sup>.

However, as invasion turns into occupation, haunted space becomes an increasingly generalizable condition via the exercise of (neo)colonial governmentality. According to Foucault, governmentality can be understood as the “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument”<sup>80</sup>. Having subdued the Iraqi population by force, coalition forces mobilized an assortment of disciplinary techniques to ensure control: the raid, the checkpoint, the roadblock, etc. But whose house gets raided? Who gets stopped at the checkpoint? By reading *Baghdad Burning*, it rapidly becomes clear that any Iraqi, whether young or old, Sunni or Shi'a or Christian or Kurd, pro-coalition or anti-coalition, man or woman, can be subjected to legal or extra-legal violence. Here, I will suggest that very logic driving the global “War on Terror”, combined with the “temporary” nature of the occupation created a set of conditions in Iraq where anything becomes permissible<sup>81</sup>.

The most obvious example of this is the raid. According to a post that Riverbend wrote on September 19, 2003, anything can happen in a raid:

“Some raids are no more than seemingly standard weapons checks. Three or four troops knock on the door and march in. One of them keeps an eye of the 'family' while the rest take a look around the house...All you have to do is stifle your feelings of humiliation, anger, and resentment at having foreign troops from an occupying army search your home...Some raids are quite simply, raids. The door is broken down in the middle of the night, troops swarm in by the dozens. Families are marched outside, hands behind their backs, and bags upon their heads. Fathers and sons are pushed down on to the ground, a booted foot on their head or back”<sup>82</sup>.

Here, we see how raids signal a sudden and violent intrusion of the urban battle space into the most private of all lived spaces, that of the home. As Riverbend puts it: “houses are no longer sacred...we can't sleep...*we can't live*...if you can't be safe in your own house, where can you be safe?”<sup>83</sup>. This question is no doubt partially rhetorical, and yet, it is an important one to ask, particularly when one considers the fact that the “liberation” of Iraq has been accompanied by a parallel assault upon the civilian infrastructure of cities such as Baghdad. It becomes much more difficult to explain away the destruction of homes and businesses in air raids as simply more examples of “collateral damage” when coalition forces have been known to deliberately target the bare essentials of a dignified and *human* life: the livelihood of ordinary Iraqis<sup>84</sup>.

Ostensibly, the implementation of the U.S. military’s new doctrine of “culturally sensitive” counterinsurgency, heralded by the release of a new Field Manual (FM3-24) by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, was designed to avoid these problems altogether. In order to properly protect Iraq’s civilian population, the Manual recognized that “cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency”, and that:

“American ideas of what is ‘normal’ or ‘rational’ are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behaviour, level of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what may appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member”<sup>85</sup>.

This is not the time or place to explore the specifics of this “cultural turn”. However, it is worth pointing out that despite media reports which argue that the success of the “surge” in Baghdad can be attributed to this new culturally sensitive strategy, it also remains “consistent with the Orientalism that has underwritten the ‘War on Terror’ since its inception”). First, one of the

foundational assumptions of the cultural turn is that “they” are not like “us”: “they” are strange, different, and peculiar, and if “we” want to get anything accomplished, “we” must understand “them” (and not “ourselves”). By locating the cultural values and practices of the “other” in a completely separate space, the prospect of any sort of common ground between “us” and “them” is promptly marginalized. Second, despite the heavy mediatization of this cultural turn, the conduct of war remains more or less unchanged, as demonstrated by the continuation of kinetic operations and a corresponding increase in civilian deaths in both Iraq and Afghanistan by approximately 70% between 2006 and 2007<sup>86</sup>. The “cultural turn”, then, allows the U.S. military to artfully deflect public attention away from its own involvement in the problems facing Iraq, both new and old. Raids, whether they are culturally sensitive or not, are still raids: backed up by the force of U.S. governmentality, they serve as but one of many reminders to the Iraqi population that a foreign army is occupying the space of their nation-state.

Furthermore, restrictions on mobility, imposed or otherwise, within Baghdad have also highlighted the extent to which ordinary Iraqis have been categorized not as civilians of a legitimate state, but rather, as a risky population against which pre-emptive security measures must be taken<sup>87</sup>. According to Riverbend, some days were “simply a mess”:

“It feels like half of Baghdad was off-limits. We were trying to get from one end to the other to visit a relative and my cousin kept having to take an alternate route. There's a huge section cut off to accommodate the 'Green Zone' which seems to be expanding. We joke sometimes saying that they're just going to put a huge wall around Baghdad, kick out the inhabitants, and call it the 'Green City'. It is incredibly annoying to know that parts of your city are inaccessible in order to accommodate an occupation army”<sup>88</sup>.

For those Iraqis who needed to enter the Green Zone for whatever reason, access was restricted: boulevards were blocked by snarling traffic on the outside, while people waited in line at the gates only to endure body searches and identity checks, ostensibly for security reasons<sup>89</sup>. But for most Iraqis, the Green Zone is much more than an annoyance. Rather, it has become a permanent political fact on the ground<sup>90</sup>. As *the* symbol of American imperial power and corruption, it acts as a lightning rod for Iraqi anger, disappointment, and disgust. According to Riverbend, what Iraqis find particularly frustrating is the fact that while Baghdad seems to be on the verge of falling apart due to broken roads, blasted and burnt out buildings, and utilities that no longer function properly, the Green Zone flourishes: the walls surrounding the restricted areas housing Americans and “Puppets” get higher, as concrete reinforcements, road blocks, barbed

wires, and armed patrols increasingly become part of the natural scenery. The Green Zone makes Iraqis anxious: “it symbolizes the heart of the occupation and if fortifications and barricades are any indicator – the occupation is going to be here for a long time. It is a provocation because no matter how anyone tries to justify it, it is like a slap in the face. It tells us that while we are citizens in our own country, our comings and goings are restricted because portions of the country *no longer belong to its people*. They belong to the people living in the Green Republic”<sup>91</sup>. As a virtual country inside of a country with its own rules, regulations, and government, the Green Zone is a topological space, both inside and outside of Iraq<sup>92</sup>.

In order to preserve the integrity of the topological geographies of the Green Zone, coalition forces have engaged in what Mbembe calls the “dynamics of territorial fragmentation”. Checkpoints, road blocks, and armed patrols becomes nodes in a network whose main goal is to render any movement nearly impossible for certain sections of the urban population, thereby implementing separation along the model of the apartheid state<sup>93</sup>. In the “new Baghdad”, friends and family may live in the same city, but for ordinary Iraqi's, it feels as if they are “worlds apart”. For example, here is Riverbend describing a road trip that she took in August 2003 with her brother and her cousin:

“The ride that took 20 minutes pre-war Iraq, took 45 minutes today. There were major roads completely cut off by tanks. Angry troops stood cutting off access to the roads around palaces...The cousin and I debated alternative routes at every checkpoint or roadblock”<sup>94</sup>.

What made matters worse for ordinary Iraqis is the fact that the geography of these checkpoints, road blocks, and patrols is constantly shifting according to the logic of the occupation. Different military operations required different partitionings of urban space to ensure their success, and the number and location of checkpoints, road blocks, and patrols changed accordingly. Some of the larger operations restrict mobility throughout all of Baghdad. Operation Lightning, for instance, split Karkh (west Baghdad) and Rasafa (east Baghdad) into 22 different sub-districts, set up 675 different checkpoints, and mobilized 40,000 Iraqi security forces to patrol the streets of the city, as well as guard its entrances<sup>95</sup>. Barriers to mobility were also erected in the event of a “terrorist attack”, or to enhance security in particular areas where Iraqi government officials be having a meeting:

“There were several explosions and road blocks today. It took the cousin an hour to get to work, which was only twenty minutes away before the war. Now, he has to navigate between closed streets, check points, and those delightful concrete barriers rising up



everywhere...Baghdad has been cut up into sections and several of them may be found to be off limits immediately after an explosion or before a Puppet meeting. The least pleasant situation is to be caught in mid-day traffic, on a crowded road, in the heat – waiting for the next bomb to go off”<sup>96</sup>.

What is particularly interesting about this post is that it highlights the fact that the constantly shifting geographies of (neo)colonial occupation have shattered any sense of normalcy in the day to day lives of Riverbend and her family. More than anything, Baghdad has become a city of uncertainties: checkpoints are themselves potential sites of violent conflict, as their proper functioning depends upon their ability to not only threaten, but also actualize, impromptu raids, body searches, and even detentions<sup>97</sup>. As Riverbend blogs: “seeing the checkpoints on Al-Jazeera, CNN, or BBC is nothing like driving solemnly up to them, easing the car to a stop, and praying that the soldier on the other side doesn’t think that you look decidedly suspicious...or that his gun doesn’t go off”<sup>98</sup>. Similarly, people are also terrified of raids:

“Today, a child was killed in Anbar, a governorate north west of Baghdad. His name was Omar Jassim and he was no more than 10 years old, maybe 11...he was killed during an American raid – no one knows why. His family are devastated – nothing was taken from the house, because nothing was found in the house. *It was just one of those raids.* You never know what will happen – who might get shot, who might react wrong – what exactly the wrong reaction might be”<sup>99</sup>.

This passage is taken from one of Riverbend’s first blog entries, and over the course of the occupation, the arbitrariness of raids would only horrify her more. One Al-Jazeera video that she watched with her family was particularly shocking:

The mosque was strewn with bodies of Iraqis – not still with prayer or meditation, but prostrate with death...the stillness of the horrid place. Then, the stillness is broken – in walk some marines, guns pointed at the bodies – the mosque resonates with harsh American voices arguing over a body – was he dead? Was he alive? I watched, tense, wondering what they would do – I expected the usual marines treatment – that a heavy booted foot would kick the man perhaps to see if he groaned. But it didn’t work that way – the crack of gunfire explodes as a Marine fires at the seemingly dead man and then come the words ‘He’s dead now’”<sup>100</sup>.

These entries accomplish two things. First, they highlight the ways in which the securitization of Baghdad paradoxically increases, rather than decreases, the intensity of violence in Baghdad’s neighbourhoods by multiplying the potential theatres of conflict. If we believe Riverbend when she argues that raids, and by extension, checkpoints and roadblocks “act as a constant reminder

that we are under occupation, we are not independent, we are not free, we are not liberated, we are no longer safe in our own homes – everything now belongs to someone else”, then it follows logically that these symbols of an alien authority will be targeted by the insurgency<sup>101</sup>. For Riverbend, life itself has become something that can either be given or taken away on a whim. If it is true that the political “under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective”, then for the sovereign (i.e., the Marine), basic existence becomes reduced to an object of cold calculation. According to Butler, grievability “precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living”, and thus, it is worth pausing to assess the ways in which the Marines handled themselves in the aftermath of the incident<sup>102</sup>. As Riverbend blogs:

“‘He’s dead now’. He said it matter of factly, in a sort of sing-song voice that made by blood run cold...and the Marines around him didn’t care. They just roamed around the mosque and began to drag around the corpses because apparently, this was nothing to them. This was probably just a commonplace incident”<sup>103</sup>.

Apologists will argue that the Marines were just doing their job and that if anyone is to be blamed it should be President Bush. This is a disingenuous argument. For both the soldiers and supports of the War on Terror, “Iraqi life” is much too easily conflated with “terrorist life”, and thus, becomes essentially inconsequential: it is impossible for the marines to grieve because their targets were never even living in the first place. Despite the difficulties of representing the realities of total destruction that I identified earlier, Riverbend tries to highlight the precariousness of life by humanizing both the urban landscapes and the conflicts taking place within them, thus, at least partially, recovering and reconstructing Baghdad’s human geographies.

If we take a look at the ways in which Baghdad is being completely restructured along both ethno-sectarian and gender lines, the precariousness of Riverbend’s own life becomes all too apparent. For Pratt, thinking much more carefully about bodily practices and their performance in space can help feminist geographers move beyond the temporal in order to “[ground] processes of subject constitution [in] networks of objects and spatial relations”<sup>104</sup>. For instance, in the case of post-liberation Iraq, a woman’s attire has suddenly become intensified as a marker of difference:

“You feel it all around you. It begins slowly, and almost insidiously. You stop wearing slacks or jeans or skirts that show any leg because you

don't want to be stopped in the street and lectured by someone who doesn't approve. You stop wearing short sleeves and start preferring wider shirts with a collar that will cover up some of your neck. You stop letting your hair flow because you do not want to attract attention to it. On the days when you forget to pull it back into a ponytail, you want to kick yourself and you rummage around in your handbag trying to find a hairband...and make sure you attract less attention from *them*”<sup>105</sup>.

What is often missed in discussions of Iraqi women's rights in mainstream media and policy circles is the extent to which the intense focus upon issues of clothing (particularly the Muslim veil) elides the fact that a majority of the discrimination stems from shifting attitudes relating to the very bodily, material presence of females in certain public spaces and positionalities. It is the increasing proliferation of such an oppressive atmosphere that caused Riverbend to lose her job as a professional computer programmer in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war: she was told quite bluntly to just “go home” because her co-workers refused to be responsible for anything that happens to her, as a “female who couldn't be protected”. Riverbend's experience is by no means unique. Over the course of her blog, several powerful female authority figures were the target of assassination attempts, such as Henna Aziz, a prominent electrical engineer, and Akila Al-Hashimi, then a member of the Iraqi Governing Council<sup>106</sup>. Furthermore, it was becoming much more dangerous for women to leave the private space of the home and do simple things, such as run errands or buy groceries, unescorted. For instance, each time Riverbend went out, she had to be accompanied by her brother, her father, her uncle, or her cousin: “a woman, or girl, out alone, risks anything from insults to abduction. An outing has to be arranged at least an hour beforehand. I state that I need to buy something or have to visit someone. Two males have to be procured (preferably large) and 'safety arrangements' must be made in this total state of lawlessness. And always the question... 'But do you have to go out and buy it? Can't I get it for you?' No you can't, because the kilo of eggplant I absolutely have to select with my own hands is just an excuse to see the light of day and walk down a street”<sup>107</sup>. Here, it seems to me that for Riverbend, it is impossible to be both unveiled and revolutionary in the sense described by Mohanram, for the dominant powers of “revolution” in Iraq remain firmly ensconced within the convoluted racialized and gendered apparatus of *American imperialism*, thus legitimizing the patriarchal decision concerning which gender identities are appropriate to be performed in urban public space<sup>108</sup>.

Furthermore, as Mohanram points out, it is “commonplace that discourses on the nation presume an idealized, gendered (read ‘male’) citizen”<sup>109</sup>. If we accept the American claim that the

“liberation” of Iraq has transformed it into a modern nation-state, it is also becoming increasingly clear that women are being systematically excluded from this new Iraqi modernity. First, *Baghdad Burning* highlights legalistic geographies of exclusion. For Riverbend, the Iraqi Governing Council’s decision (number 173) to change the previously secular family law to Shari’a represents a “giant step backwards” for women’s rights, despite the claims to the contrary that have been made by supporters of the War on Terror. Perhaps even more surprising, though, are the ways in which Iraqi women have also been written out of history: politically, they do not even exist. Consider, for instance, the very first “democratic” elections held in Iraq, where it was revealed that on all the ballot cards, the gender of each and every voter was labeled male<sup>110</sup>. According to Riverbend, some people were saying that many religious families do not want their “womanfolk” voting and thus, this particular “system” allows the head of the family to take the woman’s ID card and *vote for her*. Another theory was that it would become easier for people making fake IDs to vote in place of females. No matter the reason for the “mistake”, the ballots denied Iraqi women a space in the political sphere of their own nation-state on both discursive and material levels. Indeed, in the aftermath of the elections, Riverbend watched a televised speech by Ibrahim Jaffari, newly appointed Iraqi vice president, confirming her fears:

“I noticed two things immediately. The first was that [Jaffari] seemed to be speaking to only male students. There were no females in the audience. He spoke of their female ‘sisters’ in absentia, as if they had absolutely no representation in the gathering. The second thing was that he seemed to be speaking to only Shi’a because he kept mentioning their ‘Sunni’ brothers, as if they too were absent. He sermonized about how men should take care of the women and how Sunnis weren’t bad at all. I waited to hear him speak about Iraq unity, and the need to not make religious distinctions – those words never came”<sup>111</sup>.

In a sense, Riverbend's own positionality is “all that matters” in post-war Iraq because her status as a young and professional female has already excluded her from exercising her rights as an Iraqi citizen: to vote, to work, and to wander the streets of her city without fear of abduction, rape, or violence.

This passage also hints at the parallels that were being drawn by writers such as Edward Wong between the situation in Baghdad at the end of 2004 and the early stages of ethno-sectarian warfare<sup>112</sup>. As coalition assaults on Fallujah intensified from April of 2004 onwards, thousands of Sunni refugees began to stream into the western neighbourhoods of Baghdad. Riverbend blogs about this massive inflow of refugees in an entry written on November 1, 2004, suggesting

that people are greeting the refugees from Fallujah like heroes by emptying rooms in houses to accommodate them, and by donating food, money, and first aid supplies. However, as Michael Schwartz points out, other residents were not quite as happy. Sunni militias that were originally organized to deal with local crime began to harass Shi'a residents in some of Baghdad's 200 mixed neighbourhoods, eventually initiating a systematic campaign of expulsion in order to provide housing for the massive influx of Sunni refugees. Ethno-sectarian violence continued to intensify in 2006, particularly after the bombing of the Golden Dome mosque in Sumarrah<sup>113</sup>. As Shi'a refugees streamed into Baghdad, the cycle of violence was renewed: according to Riverbend, some families would wake up in the morning to find an envelope containing a kalashnikov bullet and a letter telling them to "leave their area or else". Others were not so lucky: "There's an ethnic cleansing in progress and it's impossible to deny. People are being killed according to their ID card. Extremists on both sides are *making life impossible*...we hear about Shi'a being killed in the 'Sunni triangle' and corpses of Sunnis named 'Omar' (a Sunni name) arriving by the dozen at the Baghdad morgue". As she points out, some of these extremists worked for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant Islamist who declared war on the Shi'a after the Iraqi government launched an offensive against insurgents on the Sunni town of Tal Afar; others worked for Muqtada Al-Sadr, a prominent Shi'a leader with ties to Iran; still others worked for Iraqi Ministry of Interior<sup>114</sup>. And although the geographies of ethno-sectarian violence in Baghdad were becoming increasingly complicated, nothing was being done by coalition forces to resolve the rapidly multiplying conflicts in an effective manner. Indeed, American forces had absolutely no control in areas that are being overrun by armed Islamists, because when there was a clash between militias in a residential neighbourhood, they simply hung back and "watched things happen". American forces only seriously joined the "Battle of Baghdad" in May 2006, where, with the initiation of "Operation Together Forward", attempts were made to take control of both Sunni and Shi'a militia strongholds. However, the very mechanics of the so-called "pacification campaign" generated even more violence. As both Riverbend and Schwartz point out, targeting popular militia leaders was a strategy that is fundamentally flawed. First, the actual geography of violence is completely ignored by coalition forces. As troops stormed militia strongholds, the intensifying conflicts in the mixed neighbourhoods were being ignored, resulting in a corresponding increase in the frequency of car bombings, abductions, and forced evictions. Even in April 2004, Riverbend wrote: "I'd love to see Muqtada behind bars, but it will only cause more chaos and rage. It's much too late for that...he has been cultivating support for too long"<sup>115</sup>. Despite their involvement in so-called

jihadist activities, these militias also acted as the forces of law and order in these otherwise conflict prone environments: they directed traffic, arrested common criminals, mediated disputes, and protected the neighbourhood from unwanted outsiders, such as suicide bombers and death squads, etc. Thus, Operation Together Forward effectively encouraged the proliferation of violence by increasing the number of neighbourhoods vulnerable to para-military attack.

“Ethno-sectarian violence” is a powerful descriptor, and in the hands of some American officials and commentators, its frequent usage has shaped the conceptualization of this new round of conflict as simply the natural outcome of the “liberation” of Iraq. By October 2006, supporters of the War on Terror, such as John McCain were calling for a ground troop “surge” in Iraq of approximately 20,000 soldiers in order to stabilize the situation in Baghdad, for it was claimed that the presence of coalition forces that is the only thing preventing the Sunni and the Shi’a from killing each other in the streets of the city. By reducing the multi-dimensional violence of the Iraqi insurgency to an “ethno-sectarian conflict from which the U.S. was casually absent”, the responsibility for the intensifying conflicts in Baghdad’s mixed neighbourhoods was placed squarely on the shoulders of the local population, a point underscored by the shift from Newsweek’s cover of 15 October, 2001 – “Why they hate us” – to Time’s cover of 5 March, 2007 – “Why they hate each other”<sup>116</sup>. This is an understanding that not only legitimized the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council’s need to overlook its internal involvement in the problems that they are supposedly trying to fix, but as Riverbend demonstrates, it is also one that elides its own discursive construction<sup>117</sup>. As early as 2003, she was blogging about the fact that the Iraqi GC, as well as the CPA, were working with well-known extremist leaders in order to cultivate a counterinsurgency militia. Here, Riverbend begins to trace the outline of a state-backed apparatus of violence that feeds upon itself<sup>118</sup>. If she is correct when she suggests that most of the political affiliation in post-invasion Iraq was strongly influenced by ethnicity and religion, then it is hardly surprising that the newly elected Shi’a-dominated government continued to violently gerrymander electoral districts by legitimizing the ethnic cleansing of mixed neighbourhoods. As Riverbend points out in an entry entitled “The Raid”: “they took at least a dozen men from my aunts area alone...the street behind us dozen men fro my aunts area alone...the street behind us doesn’t have a single house with a male under the age under the age of 50...all hauled away by the ‘security’ forces of the new Iraq. The only thing they share in common is the fact that they all come from Sunni families”<sup>119</sup>. Ironically, one common response to the threat of violence that has plagued

Baghdad's mixed neighbourhoods was to appropriate and informalize the techniques of governmental control, such as the checkpoint, the armed patrol, and the roadblock. In Riverbend's neighbourhood, armed men patrolled the streets and the rooftops, while others set up home-made roadblocks in order to monitor the major roads leading into the neighbourhoods<sup>120</sup>. Even as early as August 30, 2003, men in certain areas were arranging "lookouts": "they would gather...in a street, armed with kalashnikovs, and watch out for the whole area. They would stop strange cars and ask them what family they were there to visit. Hundreds of looters were caught that way – we actually felt safe for a brief period. Then the American armoured cars started patrolling the safer residential areas, ordering the men off the streets...telling them that if they were seen carrying a weapon, they would be treated as criminals"<sup>121</sup>. Her casual description of the increasing militarization of her neighbourhood space highlights the extent to which this sort of partitioning became a necessary fact of life in what Bryan Finoki has called "this scrappy imperial abyss"<sup>122</sup>.

### *Land of Dreams*

Ultimately, such measures proved insufficient. Violence shattered Riverbend's own imaginative geographies and in September of 2007, she disappeared, as anonymously as she arose, into a crowd of refugees fleeing Baghdad. According to the UN, as of January 2009, there are approximately 2.8 million internally displaced Iraqis and a further 2 million that have fled to other countries. Of these 2 million refugees, 55% are registered by the UN as Sunni, while another 18-20% are minority groups such as Christians, Mandeans, Yazidies, Turkmen, and Shabaks, even though they only make up 3-4% of Iraq's total population<sup>123</sup>. The cold, brutal anonymity of these figures is sobering; they provide a crude, if effective, quantitative measure of Baghdad's "haunting". Reading Riverbend's two final blog posts, I am also reminded, yet again, of her postitionality<sup>124</sup>. Not many Iraqis have the means to flee across the Syrian border and in this sense, Riverbend is again one of the lucky ones. This chain of events marks the end of her blog, and for similar reasons, not many Iraqis maintain English language blogs on a regular basis anymore. Once vibrant spaces of alternative discussion, they are now increasingly becoming spaces of historical memory. For Riverbend, memories are grounded in space; they evoke and are evoked by geography. As she writes, "a house is like a museum in that it tells a certain history. You look at a cup or stuffed toy and a chapter of memories opens up before your very eyes"<sup>125</sup>. However, memory, like space, is also performative. As Donald Draper from *Mad Men*

points out during his pitch on the Kodak slide projector to company executives in the first season finale:

“Nostalgia - it’s delicate, but potent... in Greek, “nostalgia” literally means “the pain from an old wound.” It’s a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn’t a spaceship, it’s a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards... it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel, it’s called the carousel. It let’s us travel the way a child travels - around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know are loved”<sup>126</sup>.

It is, I think, fitting that memory also helped Riverbend find “home” in a rather unexpected place:

“We live in an apartment building where two other Iraqis are renting. The people in the floor above us are a Christian family from northern Iraq who got chased out of their village by Peshmerga and the family on our floor is a Kurdish family who lost their home in Baghdad to militias...the first evening we arrived, exhausted, dragging suitcases behind us, morale a little bit bruised, the Kurdish family sent over their representative – a 9 year old boy missing two front teeth, holding a lopsided cake: “We’re Abu Mohammed’s house –across from you – mama says if you need anything, just ask – this is our number. Abu Dalia’s family live upstairs, this is their number. We’re all Iraqi too...welcome to the building”. I cried that night because for the first time in a long time, so far away from home, I felt the unity that had been stolen from us in 2003”<sup>127</sup>.

Even in the present, far away from the war, Riverbend cannot forget that almost 6 years after the end of “major” combat operations, the dream of a united, stable, prosperous Iraq has “gone up in the smoke of car bombs, military raids, and a foreign occupation”<sup>128</sup>.



### *Colby Buzzell's War*

“I found about this blog website stuff in an article in *Time* magazine. It sounded like a good way to kill some time out here in Iraq, post a little diary stuff, maybe some rants, links to some cool shit, thoughts, experiences, garbage, crap, whatever. I have no set formula on how I’m going to do this, I’m just going to do it and see what happens. You think the Sex Pistols knew what the fuck they were doing when they first started jamming? They just fuckin’ did it”<sup>1</sup>.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the battlefield has become an increasingly digital/virtual space, as the new technologies of the digital revolution shape the ways in which we conceptualize, view, and prosecute late modern warfare. Armed with their digital cameras, their laptops with wireless Internet access, and their I-Pods, soldiers wishing to write down their experiences of warfare are no longer limited to using pen and paper. Some soldiers, whether they are on active duty, in the reserve pools, or even at home on leave, have become military bloggers, writing “milblogs” that are almost wholly devoted to covering any events that are deemed to be “war related” in their spare time. Although the first milblogs appeared during the invasion of Afghanistan, the numbers increased rapidly as the U.S. initiated Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. As of July 17, 2009, milblogging.com, identifies 2372 milblogs being updated at any given point in time. Of these 2372, 430 are being written from Iraq, while another 1645 are being written from the United States<sup>2</sup>. According to Hockenberry, milbloggers are a diverse group, or, as he describes them “an oddball online Greek chorus narrating the conflict in Iraq”. He identifies a “core group of about 100 regulars and hundreds more loosely organized activists, angry contrarians, jolly testosterone fuckups, self-appointed pundits, and would-be poets”, all of whom offer an “unprecedented real-time real-life window on war and the people who wage it”. For Hockenberry, the milblogosphere produces a jumbled collective voice that always competes with, and even occasionally undermines, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the “much loathed” mainstream media’s “elaborate message machine”<sup>3</sup>.

Hockenberry was writing in 2005, and things have changed considerably in the past four years. One of the more noticeable differences is the fact that the milblogosphere has been colonized by the professional military apparatus. For instance, the Department of Defense has launched a program entitled “Defense Media Activity: Emerging media” (which has its own blog at

<http://www.dodlive.mil>) in order to address “the DoD’s need to compete in an evolving global messaging space, particularly as our forces are engaged in multiple fronts around the world”<sup>4</sup>. The blog has its own RSS feed, provides frequent updates on DoD news, and even hosts a bloggers roundtable, where various milbloggers answer conference calls in order to engage in detailed discussions of military issues such as the Service Member’s Relief Act, air operations in Iraq, or the “Law of War”, among others. Multi-National Force Iraq has even established its own YouTube channel called MNFIRAQ, where it posts short video clips that provide viewers with a small glimpse of the “boots on the ground perspective” of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Unfortunately, this colonization of the so-called “emerging media” has also entailed an increasing tightening of the milblogosphere, as blogs that had previously flown under the Pentagon’s radar, such as Daniel Goetz’s *All the King’s Men* (now *La Nouvelle Feuille*), or Colby Buzzell’s *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, suddenly became the focus of intense press interest. Indeed, both Buzzell and Goetz were forced to censor their blogs by the military brass, ostensibly because they could be providing the enemy with security information that was otherwise supposed to be confidential (regarding patrols, routines, etc). For instance, in an Orwellian post entitled “Double Plus Ungood”, Goetz had this to say:

“For the record, I am officially a supporter of the [Bush administration] and of her policies. I am a proponent for the war against terror and I believe in the mission in Iraq. I understand my role in that mission and I accept it. I understand that I signed the contract which makes stop loss legal, and I retract any statements I made in the past that contradict this one. Furthermore, I have the utmost confidence in the leadership of my chain of command, including (but not limited to) the president George Bush and the honorable secretary of defense Rumsfeld. If I have ever written anything on this site or on others that lead the reader to believe otherwise, please consider this a full and complete retraction”<sup>5</sup>.

Considering the contents of a post entitled “Six Percent”, which was written approximately a month earlier, it is difficult to believe that Goetz’s retraction is sincere. Here is what he had to say about the U.S. military’s “stop-loss”<sup>6</sup> policy:

“The country lied to me, and my life is in deficit because of it. My rage and hatred are reaching a point where I sometimes feel like expressing both violently. I would not want to be on the battlefield with someone like me; but everywhere I look, I see people going through the same emotions. We are the army of The Betrayed; soldiers lied to and abused. Soldiers who will spend the rest of our lives wondering what we did to deserve our country's betrayal. That so few people in America seem to care about us adds insult to

injury. Wake up, America; right this horrible wrong before more of your youth are lied to on their way to The Slaughterhouse”<sup>7</sup>.

Although, for the most part, I will not be dealing with issues of censorship here, I begin with these entries from Goetz’s blog because I believe that they highlight the countervocal power of military blogs in general. Although Goetz and Buzzell are quite critical of the ways in which the War on Terror was being handled by officials in the Pentagon, the Department of Defense, and the White House, even pro-war blogs could become liabilities to the chain of command as well. Thus, in this chapter, I will argue that milblogs force us to think quite carefully about the ways in which a war machine moves across the space of the battlefield. Here, I am going to focus my attention upon Colby Buzzell’s *My War*, a milblog that was produced from June 22, 2004, to September 22, 2004. These questions will guide my research: Who is Colby Buzzell? What is his relationship to the kaleidoscopic geographies of the colonial present? How is the battlefield represented? And how does his narrative undermine the Pentagon’s conceptualization of Operation Iraqi Freedom? Along the way, I hope that, by thinking through these questions in greater detail, I will be able to say something productive about the curious relationship between the camera, the movie, and the waging of late modern warfare.

### *Meet “Joe Blog”*<sup>8</sup>

In his very first blog entry, Colby Buzzell tells his readership a little bit about himself: who he is, where he is from, what he is doing in Iraq, why he set up a blog. In his own words:

“I am an 11B infantry soldier in the United States Army, currently in Mosul, Iraq. Our mission: to locate, capture, and kill all noncompliant forces here in Iraq. So far we’ve done pretty damn good. I’ve been here for about eight months now, and I have no idea how much longer I’m going to be here. My whole outlook on everything has changed since being here, and I’ve probably aged a great deal over here. So far, this has been one hell of an experience. Lots of lows, very little highs...Nothing really ever changes here. Times goes by extremely slow out here as well...I am from the San Francisco Bay Area. I’ve also lived in Cleveland, Ohio, Los Angeles, and New York Fuckin’ City”<sup>9</sup>.

Buzzell began blogging in Iraq essentially in order to “kill some time”. The first time that I read through *My War*, I was under the impression that Buzzell was not blogging anonymously under a

pseudonym<sup>10</sup>. However, on my second read through, I discovered that this in fact was not the case. As Buzzell notes:

“I wanted to stay anonymous...I didn’t want my peers reading my stuff and thinking I was *some kind of fairy* geeking out with an online Web journal, writing my *feelings and experiences* down, and, most importantly, I was kinda cloudy on what the Army’s policies were about these sorts of things. Even though there were other soldiers doing them, there had to be a catch-22 somewhere. So to stay out of trouble, I decided to stay anonymous and keep my blog under the radar for as long as possible”<sup>11</sup>.

Here, I think a comparison with Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning* is useful. Even though we are told some personal information, Riverbend tries to preserve her anonymity as best as possible. Indeed, by reading her blog, it rapidly becomes clear that anonymity was more or less a necessity for Riverbend in order to preserve her personal safety, or at least, as long as she was “publicly” blogging about her experiences as an ordinary Iraqi living in occupied Baghdad. Buzzell, on the other hand, chooses to remain anonymous for different reasons: he does not want peers to think that he is a *fairy*, geeking out by jotting his *feelings* down on an online blog. According to urbandictionary.com, *fairy* is a slang that is commonly used to describe an effeminate, or even homosexual, man, and stereotypically, it is understood that “real men” do not jot their feelings down in a book, much less a blog on the Internet where everyone can you’re your thoughts. Indeed, perhaps due to his much more progressive stance on pressing political issues (such as the war in Iraq, or gay marriage, etc.), Buzzell spends quite a lot of time trying to prove his heterosexuality and virility (in other words, that he is not a liberal, pinko commie fruit) to his fellow soldiers. For instance, while in Iraq, he makes the mistake of subscribing to *Details* magazine:

“I knew exactly when the new *Details* arrived because [my squad leader] would freeze right before he read the name of the addressee (me) and with a confused look, he’d say, ‘What the fuck is this?’ and he’d flip it over and show the rest of the squad the cover, which would always be some sexy cover shot of, like, Vin Diesel, or Justin Timberlake. He’d then throw the mag at me and say something like, ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’...I of course would feel the need to explain myself...and I would open it up and flip through the pages to try to prove to the guys in my squad that *Details* was a totally hetero mag, which backfired on me because when I did, every single page I opened up to had a full-page photo of some girlie man doing his best *Zoolander*”<sup>12</sup>.

As demonstrated by the ongoing maintenance of the U.S. military's (in)famous policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", the space of the army has clearly been discursively equated with the space of the staunchly heterosexual white male: any soldier who performs an alternative gender identity is made to feel as if they do not belong in Iraq by her or his fellow soldiers, as they ostensibly fracture unit morale. On another occasion, Buzzell is made fun of by his colleagues because he did not pack any pornographic reading material for his tour of duty in Iraq. These magazines are essential pieces of battlefield equipment simply because they provide one of the only ways of releasing pent-up sexual tensions while overseas: often, soldiers will take the magazines to the outhouses on the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and, with the help of a flashlight, masturbate<sup>13</sup>. According to Buzzell, there were loud electrical generators placed near the outhouses, which, when combined with the cover of darkness, provided soldiers with a modicum of privacy. On at least one occasion, however, this "modicum of privacy" encouraged some males soldiers to find much more violent ways of releasing their tension, thus reinforcing the highly gendered nature of military space. In an entry that he wrote specifically for the book version of his blog, Buzzell notes that a female soldier had been raped while she had been using the outhouses for their intended purposes. If the space of the battlefield is a highly "male" space, it is also one that is very paternalistic as well, as all of the victim's fellow soldiers, Buzzell included, vowed to catch the "sick fuck" and inflict their own brand of "justice" on him (i.e., executing him via firing squad). However, it was still too easy for the other soldiers, even Buzzell, to contemplate the possibility that the rape victim was simply lying so that she would not have to complete her tour of duty in Iraq: the burden to prove that she had been raped was placed squarely on her shoulders<sup>14</sup>.

Before moving on, it is worth pausing for a moment to think through some of the implications of these claims. First, the "white, male, heterosexual soldiers fighting for freedom and democracy" is not a trope that simply emerged in a vacuum. As Said points out, the 19<sup>th</sup> century European subject position was often constructed in opposition to representations of the Oriental's sexually depraved ways. What is particularly interesting about the ways in which Arabs are represented by Americans who support the War on Terror is that, in addition to the frequent usage of racial epithets such as "haji", "towelhead", or "iraqistani", they are also deemed to be "fags". For Puar, this "eager proliferation of homophobic-racist images" speaks to the ways in which "the invocation of the terrorist as a queer, non-national, perversely racialized other has become part of the normative script of the U.S. War on Terror"<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, it is also worth pointing out that

U.S. “homonationalism” does not only manifest itself abroad, but is also thoroughly imbricated in Christian America’s own “war” (there is really no other words for hits) against its own “native” homosexual population. As Puar points out, “a more pernicious inhabitation of homosexual exceptionalism occurs through stagings of U.S. nationalism via a praxis of sexual othering, one that exceptionalizes the identities of U.S. homosexualities vis-à-vis Orientalist constructions of ‘Muslim Sexuality’”<sup>16</sup>. It is incredibly ironic that America has gone to war against an enemy that it deems to be both homosexual *and* hyper-masculine.

If Buzzell is privileged in the sense that he can, more or less, perform a white, male, heterosexual gender identity, it seems to me that this privilege also derives from the fact that he is a member of one of the largest occupying forces that the world as ever seen. Buzzell does not have to worry about being violently assaulted in broad daylight, intrusively searched at a check point, arrested and sent to Abu Ghraib, or evicted from his own home because of his race and gender: this is because he, as a soldier, is the one who is doing the assaulting, the killing, the raiding, the searching, and the arresting. For many, if not all Iraqis, Buzzell is the physical manifestation of American imperial power. As Riverbend might point out, his very presence on the streets of Mosul serves as a constant reminder to Iraqis that they are not free, that they still do not have democracy, that they are still being lied to, that their country still has not been properly reconstructed. Buzzell does not blog anonymously in order to think carefully and critically about these issues: rather, he blogs anonymously simply because he is afraid of losing his job. And although Buzzell is sensitive to some of the issues that I am going to raise in this chapter, it seems to me that, in the end, he is still privileged in the sense that he personifies power and yet, does not have to take responsibility for his actions: as a soldier, he can always claim that he is simply following orders which he is not allowed to question.

Another issue that I must deal with before moving on concerns the analog reproduction of digital material. In 2005, G. P. Putnam’s Sons published Buzzell’s blog as a book and marketed it towards a primarily American audience with great critical and commercial success. What this means is that *My War* does not really exist as a blog anymore. Almost all of the posts dealing with Buzzell’s experiences as an M420 gunner in Iraq have been excised from the website. Nor are there any archives: all that remains are some random press reports that Buzzell is clearly using to promote himself and his book. Thus, I no longer have access to any of the pictures that Buzzell posted on his blog, nor can I browse through most of the comments that may have been

left by his readership. I say “most” here, because there is one post entitled “I don’t want to live alone” that still has comments attached to it. Judging by their content and by cross-referencing the date of the entry, I am fairly certain that this is the entry where Buzzell provides an in-depth description of a “successful raid” that he carried out with his platoon on 29 July, 2004. What strikes me the most about the 43 comments that remain on Buzzell’s blog is how thoughtful (and perhaps even polite) the discussion is, at least compared to the MNFIRAQ channel on YouTube. For the most part, commentators simply chose to praise Buzzell’s ability as a writer. For example: “Your post today is incredible, I felt as though *I was standing there viewing the entire episode*”. Or as sarah raves:

“Your entries are amazing, completely unlike anything I have ever read before. I credit you with inspiring my new interest in the war in Iraq. You finally bought the human aspect of the war into my perspective. To me, soldiers were always just numbers on the nightly new and I could never truly grasp the reality of your situation”

Indeed, for most of the readers, Buzzell has a “knack for writing that allows the reader to be right with [him]”: he cuts through all of the bullshit and blogs “honestly” about the realities of the war in Iraq<sup>17</sup>. However, while reading through the 43 comments remaining of Buzzell’s blog, I stumbled upon a particularly fascinating debate concerning the role of the milblogger during times of war. Ron Brynaert began the discussion by asking a very simple question: was there any evidence tying the suspect that was detained at the end of the blog entry to the killing of “shitloads of innocent people”<sup>18</sup>. Buzzell answered this question directly, but his comment was “removed by the blog administration”. Other readers suggested that soldiers do not need to think about mirandas, rights, search warrants, or juries because they are *at war* and *simply doing their job*. Here is one particularly though provoking intervention:

“I hate to tell you this, but CB does not have any ‘responsibility’ to explain anything to you because (in my opinion) this blog is not about YOU. My understanding about this blog is that CB is a soldier serving in Iraq who decided to share his thoughts...It is one thing to ask questions that may or may not be answered, but in the end its YOUR ‘responsibility’ to either accept or not accept the information that he chooses to provide...just consider yourself fortunate and privileged that you are able to be a part of something that he has decided to share”<sup>19</sup>.

Although Buzzell is certainly no professional journalist, I am not sure that I agree with this assessment of his situation. First, by blogging, he places his ideas and opinions within the public

domain, and as such, they become legitimate targets for criticism and analysis. It is also Ron Bynaert's *choice* to fundamentally disagree with the claims that Buzzell makes on his blog and ask him to provide evidence to back them up. If progressive bloggers such as Riverbend have to constantly defend the material that they post on their blogs, then I really do not see why Buzzell deserves any special treatment. Furthermore, as the blogosphere becomes colonized by the official military apparatus, refraining from critiquing Buzzell simply because he has chosen to share his thoughts with the general public (which is essentially what is being suggested in the comment) sets a dangerous precedent: one could very well make the same arguments for DODlive, one of the blogs maintained by the DoD.

The upshot of all this is that I cannot even be sure that the analog version of *My War* is a faithful reproduction of the original blog, as I have no original to reference it with. I do not know if there are posts that are not included in the analog version, or if Buzzell employed the help of a ghostwriter to tighten up his writing. In the book, Buzzell's entries are not even published in chronological order turning it into more of a narrative than an "analog blog" in any strict sense of the term<sup>20</sup>. Although these are certainly issues that I need to take into consideration, the fact that the book is not a simple reproduction of the blog is also perhaps a blessing in disguise, in that Buzzell was probably asked to write a lot of new material by his publishers. Not only has he expanded upon his old posts in much greater detail, he also chronicles his experiences before deployment in Iraq, and includes some brand new entries that had previously not been published at all. Thus, although I am forced to reference the book for this particular chapter, I believe that the new material, in its own way, makes up for the fact that I cannot read his blog online, and access both the pictures and most of the comments.

The publishers, I think, are aware of these limitations and they try, as best they can, to recover the interactivity of the blog format and the emotional impact that Buzzell's posts had upon certain members of his readership. For a couple of weeks in July 2004, Buzzell had a mail-call feature on his blog, where he directly responded to some of his readers questions, a section which is reproduced in his book. But Buzzell and the publishers go even further. At one point in his blog, Buzzell discovers that much of what was going on in Iraq on a day to day basis (specifically, the clashes that occurred in Mosul on August 4, 2004) received little to no press "back home" in any of the major new outlets. This lack of detailed information made it difficult for parents to know, or even to imagine, what their children were experiencing as soldiers in



Iraq. Thus, for some parents, *My War* also provided some much need (though most likely highly inadequate) closure. For instance, one of Buzzell's platoon members, Lt. Damon Armeni, was severely injured during the Mosul clashes, and on his blog, Buzzell asked his readership to include the "Lt. and his family in their prayers"<sup>21</sup>. What was not posted on *My War* was an email that Buzzell received from Armeni's father:

"Thank you for your site. I was able to read a little more into the event that left my son Lt. Damon Armeni wounded and in critical condition. I am a retired officer and served in Vietnam, Panama, and the first Gulf War. Being able to read a little more into the events that lead up to his injury helps. I am so very proud of him. Thank you to the young soldier that left those remarks, they said my son was cussing the Iraq people as they were taking him away..."<sup>22</sup>.

Furthermore, in response to the call for prayer, Armeni's father asked Buzzell to "make the bastards pay": as Dan Armeni put it, "I know that he is mad because they managed to get him and he thought that they were cowards and you guys were the best...make their lives miserable CB, and as a TC, watch out for your men"<sup>23</sup>. It is impossible for anyone to know whether Damon really wished for those "bastards" to pay or this was simply his father's way of coming to grips with his own helplessness. Nevertheless, it is these e-mails that, more than anything, highlight the emotional power of *My War* and Buzzell's ability to tug at emotions, to stir up debate, and to cause controversy.

Another interesting point that is worth mentioning is that Buzzell's original blog was very much focused upon describing formal military operations and experiences: raids, patrols, deployments, etc. But in some of the new material, he briefly widens his focus and acknowledges the fact that there is a much broader political economy at work in Iraq providing much needed support to the U.S. military. Here, I am specifically referring to an entry entitled "Only the dead have seen the end of the war", where Buzzell describes a conversation that he had with a captain concerning a private military contractor (PMC) called Global Security, also known as the "Black Death" to locals. According to the captain:

"when the Global Security guys would drive around downtown to do their escort missions or *whatever the hell they do*, if they got ambushed by an RPG or small arms fire, they've been known to just unload on everybody and anything around them. Story goes that they once killed 46 people in a situation like that"<sup>24</sup>.

Neither Buzzell nor the captain knew if there was any truth to the story or not. In fact, nobody, even those directly involved in Operation Iraqi Freedom, seems to know what Global Security (and perhaps any other PMC) is up to. As Buzzell writes:

“I know very little about the Global Security guys, we never worked with them, they did their thing and we did ours. The only time I ever saw them was when they were dead or when they got ambushed and my platoon would get called up to go out and secure the area around one of their burning SUVs, or when I was on gate guard and they would drive past us through the gate in their unarmored white SUVs, which was completely mind-boggling to me, because it was psycho enough to drive around town in an armored vehicle with a .50-cal mounted on top”<sup>25</sup>.

Here, the business of war is bracketed and conducted in an entirely different economic, political, and geographical scale. Whether we are talking about the spatialities of PMC activity, or the complicated geographies of the outsourced supply chains that keep the army functioning on a day to day basis, the war economy is a rather nebulous object that has been the subject of little sustained and critical analysis. I cannot even begin to do justice to such a project in this thesis. However, I will note that this confusion highlights the ways in which the American war machine is not only an incredibly complex, but also an incredibly messy beast. Different wars are being fought by its different components, and thus, Colby Buzzell’s war is not the same war that Global Security, or even the Pentagon, are fighting in Iraq. Here, we can begin to see how the boundaries between representations and reality might begin to bleed, to fuzz, and to blur

### *Dissociative Events*

“The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture”<sup>26</sup>.

“Pictures only show you a fraction of a second. You don’t see forward, and you don’t see backward. You don’t see outside of the frame”<sup>27</sup>.

In the documentary *Waltz With Bashir*, the director, Ari Folman, spends an entire movie trying to reconstruct his repressed memories of the First Lebanon War, particularly the massacre of Palestinian and Lebanese citizens that took place in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in West Beirut by the Christian Phalangists. According to Robert Fisk, what happened in the refugee camps between 16 September and 18 September, 1982, was nothing less than a war crime:

“there were women lying in houses with their skirts torn up to their waists and their legs wide apart, children with their throats cut, rows of young men shot in the back after being lined up at an execution wall. There were babies – blackened babies because they had been slaughtered more than 24-hours earlier and their small bodies were already in a state of decomposition – tossed into rubbish heaps alongside discarded US army ration tins, Israeli army equipment, and empty bottles of whisky”<sup>28</sup>.

Although he did not directly contribute to the genocide, his brain suppressed almost all of his memories of the war: where he was, who he talked to, what he did, etc. For Professor Zahara Salomon, a specialist in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) who was interviewed in the film, parallels can be drawn between what Folman experienced in West Beirut and what she calls “dissociative events”. As she explains, a dissociative event occurs when:

“a person is in a situation, but feels outside it. I was once visited by a young man, an amateur photographer. I asked him in 1983, ‘How did you survive through that grueling war?’. He replied, ‘It was quite easy. I regarded it as a day long trip’. He told himself: ‘Wow! What great scenes: shooting, artillery, wounded people, screaming...’. *He looked at everything as if through an imaginary camera. Then something happened. His ‘camera’ broke.* He said that the situation turned traumatic for him, when they arrived at the vicinity of the stables in Beirut”.

AF: “The Hippodrome...”.

ZS: “He saw a huge number of carcasses of slaughtered Arabian horses. ‘It broke my heart’, he said. ‘What had these horses done to deserve such suffering?’ He couldn’t handle seeing those dead and wounded horses. He had used a mechanism to remain outside events, as if watching the war on film. This protected him. *Once pulled into the events*, he could no longer deny reality. Horror surrounded him *and he freaked out*”<sup>29</sup>.

During the First Lebanon War, handheld photography was a technology that was still in its infancy: although the first handheld electronic camera was invented by Sony in 1981, the device did not reach the market until 1986, with the Canon RC-701. Nowadays, Salomon’s imaginary camera” has seemingly been replaced by the digital camera, a device that has been made so affordable and so accessible to the soldier of contemporary new wars that it has become ubiquitous on the battlefield. Indeed, the digital camera is an object that appears in the strangest places in *My War*: namely, in the middle of intense firefights. For instance, on 24 June, 2004, Buzzell’s platoon was ordered to assault the Sheikh Fatih police station, which had been

completely taken over by insurgent guerilla fighters. Although his job was to scan the area and make sure that nobody tries to attack the American forces from behind, he cannot resist turning around every couple of seconds in order to take a look at all the shooting that is going on and eventually, he pulls out his digital camera and starts taking photos of the urban battlefield. Even the platoon's combat medic cannot resist taking a few snapshots of the firefight:

“I looked over to my side and I saw a hand holding a digital camera poking out of SPC. Cumming's air-guard hatch like it was a submarine periscope. It was Doc Haibi taking photos from inside the vehicle...Even our combat medic, whose job was to treat casualties, not create them or become one, couldn't resist getting in on this and he literally stuck himself up out of the air-guard hatch next to me where Spc. Cummings was and both of them together were engaging the tower”<sup>30</sup>.

Indeed, almost everyone that Buzzell blogs about in *My War* brings along a digital camera with them when they have to go out on patrol, when they have to sit and wait at an observation post, when they have to go on a raid, when they have to participate in an improvised explosive device (IED) sweep, etc. During a particularly intense round of American bombing, he blogs:

“It's amazing how everybody in my platoon slowly turned into professional combat photographers as this deployment went on. Everybody pulled out their digital cameras and started doing some night photography. If you want to do combat night photography, here's what you do: you take your Night Observation Devices (NOD) off your helmet, put your camera lens to the eyepiece of your NODs, and now your camera has night vision. (I learned this trick when I was in Kuwait and I took photos this way of the lights that would beam up at night from the oil refineries”<sup>31</sup>.

Here, it is important to note that the use of the digital camera – much like the blog – has been incorporated into official, authorized military practice, particularly with the deployment of the “Tactical Ground Reporting System” (Or TIGRNET for short) in early 2007. According to Talbot, TIGRNET is a “map-centric application” that junior offices can consult before heading out on patrol and add to upon their return. From what I can tell, TIGRNET seems to be a combination of GIS and remote sensing technology, whereby junior offices, by clicking on icons and lists, can:

“see the location of key buildings...and retrieve information such as location data on past attacks, geotagged photos of houses and other buildings (taken with cameras equipped with Global Positioning System technology) and photos of suspected insurgents and neighbourhood leaders. They can even listen to civilian interviews and watch videos of past maneuvers. It's just the kind

of information that soldiers need to learn about Iraq and its perils”<sup>32</sup>.

With its focus upon the exchange of “peer-based information’ and its flattening of traditional command structures, TIGRNET is a crucial part of the Pentagon’s long term plan to transform the U.S. military into “Walmart”.

I will return to this issue later on in the chapter. For now, I wish to point out that, following Butler, I am not only interested in the ways in which photographs frame warfare, but also in how the frame itself structures an image, and makes reference to a whole slew of a priori assumptions and conceptualizations that will then influence our seemingly object interpretations and conclusions. As she writes:

“The question for war photography thus concerns not only what it shows, but also how it show what it shows. The ‘how’ not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well. If state power attempts to regulate a perspective that reporters and cameramen are there to confirm, then the action of perspective in and as the frame is part of the interpretation of the war compelled by the state. *The photograph is not merely a visual image awaiting interpretation; it is itself actively interpreting, sometimes forcibly so*”<sup>33</sup>.

Bearing all of this in mind, I wish to return to Salomon’s “amateur photographer” and his decision to regard the First Lebanese War as though it was a day long trip. What do people do when they go on trips? More often than not, they take pictures of the beautiful scenery. And what is particularly interesting about the role that the digital camera plays in Buzzell’s blog is that it seems to turn the horrors of late modern warfare into a series of pictures waiting to be taken. Consider Buzzell’s description of the non-stop bombing of Tal Afar by a C130 Specter gunship that occurred on September 9, 2004, as part of Operation Black Typhoon:

“From where we were, the explosions coming from the city looked like they were happening in slow motion, they gave off these beautiful flashes of light, magentas and reds and violets. The bombing looked extremely peaceful to me from where I was sitting. Like something out of the movie *Fantasia*. In fact in my head I had classical music going as I sat there on my ass watching all this go on. I had to remind myself that each one of those beautiful explosions that I was witnessing probably took somebody’s life”<sup>34</sup>.

Here, Buzzell himself acknowledges the ways in which the use of digital cameras can enframe an event in a particular way, thus creating a sort of distancing effect which magically transforms bomb blasts into peaceful flashes of bright colours, thereby cleaning up, fuzzing, and sanitizing death and destruction. Late modern warfare is compared to the children's movie *Fantasia*, as if Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck themselves were manning the gunships that were bombing Tal Afar. I do not think it is a coincidence that Ari Folman could not imagine *Waltz With Bashir* being anything other than an animated documentary.

For Butler, however, frames are always unstable, and thus, the point “would be not to locate what is ‘in’ or ‘outside’ the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself”<sup>35</sup>. With respect to Buzzell's account of the bombing of Tal Afar, death is both partially eclipsed and partially marked: the explosions themselves produce spaces in the urban environment where life is extinguished with ease, and yet, their “beauty” makes it possible for Buzzell to ignore, at least for a split second, their gruesome consequences. With each explosion, death slips in through the back door (in that each explosion probably takes a life), and yet, its traces are expunged almost immediately (“I had to remind myself”): Buzzell's digital camera, imaginary or otherwise, is thus constantly on the verge of breaking down.

In the next section of this chapter, I will try to accomplish two things. First, if Butler is correct when she argues that the “critical role for visual culture during times of war...is...to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and indeed, what can be”, then we need to expand our domain of inquiry beyond the confines of war photograph<sup>36</sup>. It is not only important to think about the ways in which we, as human beings, “enframe” events such as war with our own imaginary cameras, we must also be conscious of the ways in which certain institutions (in this case, the Pentagon) are trying to manipulate the so-called “field of representability” to their own advantage while at the same, downplaying the inherent instabilities of their own ways of grasping and conceiving the world. In short, we need to think carefully about how Operation Iraq Freedom itself has become “enframed”. Second, I will show how Buzzell's blog undermines the Pentagon's efforts to sell its vision of how late modern warfare ought to be conducted to the American public.

*A Revolution in Military Affairs?*

In the introduction to this thesis, I argued that the American war machine was undergoing a so-called “Revolution in Military Affairs”. Top military brass believed that they could harness the power of high technology in order to create a fully networked fighting force composed of both smart soldiers and smart weaponry. Due to the U.S. military’s overwhelming technological superiority, war would no longer be war in any traditional sense of the term: not only would Clausewitz’s “fog of war” be banished forever, but conflict would be a clean, surgical, and precise affair. Unnecessary death (or at least, civilian death) would be expunged from the battlefield altogether.

Of course, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, things did not go exactly as planned for the Pentagon. It rapidly became clear that although the RMA had drastically simplified the *invasion* of Iraq, the occupation of complex, multi-dimensional cities such as Baghdad would prove to be a completely different ball game altogether. As Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Plamp grudgingly points out, a city such as Baghdad cannot be grasped in its entirety by any single form of representation, even by the pilots of Predator drones: “we’re in the thick of these ground missions, and as a result, we’re just as confused as anyone sometimes. It’s the typical fog of war...”<sup>37</sup>. For all of its hype, the Predator drone fails to live up to the expectations outlined by Admiral Owens almost 14 years ago. Furthermore, although mainstream media coverage of the current revolution in military affairs has partially raised public awareness regarding the invasion (and subsequent occupation of Iraq), it has also turned the war and the new technology that is being used to fight it into a sensationalized spectacle. In the days leading up to the invasion, civilian news outlets eager to provide their readership with the latest information on Baghdad-as-target often tried to present it in a manner that imitated what was believed to be the display or the command interface of the latest in military technology. For example, on the *TIME* magazine website, online readers could directly interact with and learn information about different targets on a satellite map of Baghdad. By dragging their mouse over the targets’ co-ordinates in virtual space, detailed information and high-resolution photographs were made available to online readers. Here, Baghdad is essentially transformed into a grid of targets: the reader interacts with strategic locations that will or will not be bombed by coalition forces, as opposed to neighbourhoods that are home to ordinary Iraqis (and not terrorists)<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, this sensationalization of technology by the mainstream media also obscures the very real fact that a

ground war is being fought in the streets of the city by ordinary men and women who have done little more than pass basic training back home in the United States. Unlike the Predator pilots, there was no distance between GIs like Buzzell and the “non-compliant forces” that they are supposed to locate, capture, and kill.

Baghdad may have been bombed into submission in a relatively short amount of time (3 days?), but “War-mart’s” ability to “concentrate overpowering violence on precisely delineated targets” did not translate well in the transition from invasion to occupation. As a result, Buzzell rarely discusses the technology of Owens’ revolution in military affairs in his account of the Iraq War. In fact, he spends much more time discussing how it is *not* being used:

“As far as I knew, and I asked around, we didn’t catch a single one of those mortar men in the act of mortaring our FOB the entire time we were there. Not one. We had the technology to pinpoint precisely where the mortars were being fired from almost instantly and could have had the guys in artillery return the favor and fire a huge shell right back at them, right down their mortar tubes and blow those motherfucking Ali Babas to bits, but we didn’t do that. Probably because the guys who fire the mortars at us did it from ‘friendly’ civilian neighbourhoods and we didn’t want to blow up any Iraqi civilians who might be in the wrong place and the wrong time”<sup>39</sup>.

Here is a tacit admission that it is in fact impossible to “precisely delineate” a target, for even if the most advanced GPS systems are used to pinpoint a location in space, low-tech explosive shells are still needed to finish the job. In some ways, “War-mart’s” ability to function properly is hampered first by the very nature of urban space (i.e., dense) and second by the desire to “win over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi population”, as exemplified by the very strict “Rules of Engagement” that were laid down prior to the invasion of Iraq, all of which can be broken down into four basic bullet points: attack enemy forces and military targets (assuming a positive identification, or PID), spare civilians and civilian property if possible, conduct yourself with dignity and honour, and comply with the Law of War<sup>40</sup>. Although the first rule of engagement is the one that is subject to the most qualifications, it is the “Civilian Rules of Interaction” that are probably the most interesting. Some notable highlights include: “1) Be firm, but be courteous. You can afford it – *you have the gun*. 2) *You are the foreigner*. 3) Their culture is not your culture, their customs are not your customs. They do not care about ours – we need a working knowledge of theirs. 4) Do not humiliate or publicly embarrass an Iraqi. Their culture demands that the insult be avenged to regain ‘face’. This could range from a verbal protest to RPG attack.



5) Do not put an Iraqi's forehead on the ground. If you do, you will make an enemy out of him and his entire family"<sup>41</sup>. Interestingly enough, although the memo on civilian rules of interaction is careful to point out that "their culture is not our culture", it would seem to me that some cultural characteristics are more universal than CENTCOM would allow: reacting negatively to public humiliation, for instance, or having one's forehead placed on the ground, with a boot on the back of the neck.

In fact, what is highlighted over and over again in *My War* is the fact that the battlefield is still a confusing, a disorienting, and above all, a terrifying space. Above all, nobody ever seems to really know what is going on at any given point in time. In one blog entry entitled "Light Him Up!", Buzzell is told a story by the members of his platoon's other gun time that highlight this confusion. While his platoon was conducting operations in the city of Samarra, someone who was probably on his way to work pulled out of a driveway, turned on his hazard lights, and started to drive away. One of Buzzell's friends, Spc. Horrocks, noted that the guy was being boxed in by the different platoon's out on patrol, and he was told to keep his eyes on him by superior officers. However, while this was going on, somebody else yelled "Light him up!", and pretty much every soldier who was in the area pointed their weapons at the vehicle and started firing. Eventually, some soldiers started yelling "Cease fire!", the shooting stopped, and the Iraqi emerged from the vehicle started saying "No, mista! No, mista! Don't shoot!" while holding his hands in the air. However, somebody yelled out that the Iraqi had a weapon, and so, the entire platoon started shooting at him again. Eventually, the shooting stopped again, and miraculously, the Iraqi was still alive:

"Two United States Army infantry platoons were shooting at this guy, almost all of them awarded expert marksmanship badges, armed with semiauto and fully automatic weapons, with some of the best sights on their weapons that money could buy. Thousands and thousands of rounds were expended, some shooting at near-point-blank range, and only a couple rounds hit this individual, and in non-lethal areas. If I had witnessed something like that, I'd probably start going to church"<sup>42</sup>.

In this situation, nobody knows what is going on. In the brief about the rules of engagement, Buzzell's battalion commander stands up in front of the assembled soldiers and tells them to trust their gut instincts, to "not worry about doing the right thing...that if we felt threatened, pull the trigger. *It's better to be safe than sorry, better him dead than you*": "it doesn't matter if it's a woman or a child, if they have a weapon, they have a weapon. And if you feel threatened, you

feel threatened”<sup>43</sup>. Soldiers are taught to react immediately to potentially threatening situations, training which flies completely in the face of the need to positively identify enemy targets *before* engaging them. For soldiers who must venture outside of their forward operating base on a regular basis to conduct missions and patrols, all the technology in the world cannot help them distinguish between friend and foe. As Buzzell blogs in an entry entitled “Free Advice”:

“Not everybody here is a bloody terrorist...Target identification is key. One time a different platoon in my company was doing a raid on a house, and they blew the front door up with some explosives and it woke up some Iraqi who lived down the street, who was a police officer during the day. And he came out in civilian clothes and an AK-47 to investigate what the hell was going on. He lived, but he almost didn’t”<sup>44</sup>.

So how does one go about distinguishing friends from enemies, particularly when almost everyone in Iraq seems to own an AK-47? For Buzzell, the human body itself becomes a useful marker of difference: how it moves through space, how it performs certain social identities (i.e., terrorist, Iraqi National Guardsman, etc.), how it reacts to certain geographical/environmental stimuli (the presence of U.S. soldiers, etc.). For example: “the ‘bad guy’ with an AK-47 will be crouched down in an attack position, sneaking around with an AK up ready to fire. He’s in a threatening position, being sneaky. An ICP or ING won’t move his body like that. He’ll usually be in a standing up position, more relaxed, walking around”<sup>45</sup>. Here, we can see how identities, gendered or otherwise, are performed in space<sup>46</sup>. However, for Buzzell, this is still an unsure science. What about women and children? Do the same rules apply? Do they perform their identities in space in much the same way? As it turns out, it is much more difficult to distinguish between friend and foe when the targets in question are usually assumed to be “civilians”:

“As we were driving around Mosul, a little Iraqi kid came out of nowhere on this busy street we were driving down and he pointed his toy pistol at me and simulated shooting at me like *I was some kind of U.S. soldier occupying his country*. What kind of shit is that? The toy guns the kids in Iraq play with are replica models and look exactly the real thing...It wasn’t the first time I had a little kid point a toy gun at me. It had happened to me several times actually, and every time, I just figured, and hoped, that it was just a toy and he didn’t pull the trigger”<sup>47</sup>.

The obvious irony of this particular post is the undeniable fact that Buzzell *is* in fact, “some kind of U.S. soldier occupying his country”. This is not an entirely disingenuous response, but rather, one that is consistent with the discursive politics of enframing, of creating a framework through

which a problem (i.e., the “Iraqi problem”) can be conceptualized, grasped, and then solved<sup>48</sup>.

For Buzzell and his fellow soldiers, the U.S. invasion is not the problem, but rather, the solution.

As he blogs:

“I personally think we’re making a difference for the better here for these people. I don’t know what it was like here when Saddam was in charge, but all the Iraqis that I’ve talked to tell me it sucked. Do I feel like I’ve made a difference for America? I don’t know...Every time I leave the FOB and hit the streets here in Mosul, my cargo pockets get filled with gifts from the Iraqi people. Fruits, breads, candies, toys, whatever. Yeah, there’s a lot of people who also hate us, but you don’t know their story”<sup>49</sup>.

This particular passage reads almost like a dismissal of “those who hate us” *and* “their story”.

Buzzell frequently blogs about the importance of learning basic Arabic phrases in order to ensure the success of patrols and raids. In a blog entry entitled “Free Advice”, Buzzell tells news recruits to “learn as much Arabic as [they] can” and to “practice [their] Arabic...on the interpreters, contractors, shop owners, whoever”<sup>50</sup>. Buzzell did blog about some of the Iraqis that he interacted with on a day to day basis: vendors and street urchins, kids on the streets who point toy guns at soldiers, his interpreters, etc. Indeed, in some of the new material that Buzzell includes in the book, it becomes clear that his FOB (Marez) is sustained by an informal network of Iraqi contractors and entrepreneurs. The internet café, the juice stand, the tailor, and a wide variety of miscellaneous business enterprises (a scooter vendor, gift shops, bootleg DVD vendors, etc.) were owned and operated by the “Hajjis”. Even the transportation system within the FOB was subcontracted out to Iraqis: “We had Iraqis driving these Third World-looking buses around the FOB that were un-air-conditioned most of the time, but they did play authentic Middle Eastern music. Sometimes they wouldn’t even pick you up, they’d just drive right past or refuse to give you a lift because they claimed to be running low on fuel (I always felt like cocking my weapon at them whenever they did that to me)”<sup>51</sup>. Buzzell’s very existence in Iraq is thus subsidized by an informal that he more or less glosses over in his blog. When I read about them in *My War*, however, it seems as if they have been reduced to one-dimensional caricatures of themselves: it is not important for Buzzell to “know their story”, because there is no immediate linkages that can be drawn between “knowing their story” and fulfilling his goal of doing his job properly and completing his tour of duty in Iraq.

Furthermore, when describing a raid that he conducts with two of his squad members, Sgt.

Vance, and Spc. Callahan, Buzzell is curiously unable to consider the impact that blowing the

“fuckin’ front door” up with explosives, storming into house, throwing a bunch of flash bang grenades around, detaining the target individuals with blindfolds and zip ties, violently searching the house, and then just driving off, might have upon a family, terrorists or otherwise. As he blogs:

“I felt sorrow for that lady and her kids, and wonder what’s going to happen to them now. But this guy that we got was a real piece of shit, killed a shitload of innocent people, and their families are forever changed and a lot of Iraqi people are spending the rest of their lives alone because of this scumbag. Bottom line is Iraq is now a way safer place now that he’s off the streets. But regardless, you still feel kinda sorry for the lady and the kids and wonder what the hell is going to happen to them now”<sup>52</sup>.

One could also argue that Iraq would also be a safer place if it was not under foreign occupation<sup>53</sup>. And it is precisely this detachment that drew criticism from commentators such as Riverbend, and forced the Pentagon to come up with a new doctrine of “Cultural Counterinsurgency”, a new understanding of adversary culture. Even when Buzzell is being critical of the Bush administration and the way it handled the invasion, and subsequent occupation of Iraq, he is still unable to move away from the framework that allows him to order, to circumscribe, and to exclude<sup>54</sup>. For instance, when Buzzell is discussing the Abu Ghraib scandal in his blog, he is in shock and disbelief, not so much because American soldiers were torturing Iraqis, but because “all that hard work that we did in Iraq” immediately went “down the tubes”<sup>55</sup>. Furthermore, he is once again unable to accept that the U.S. army itself is part of the problem, as he argues that those “*so-called* soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison were a *bunch of idiots*, and if it was up to us, as fair punishment, we would let those Iraqis that they tortured torture them”<sup>56</sup>. Here, the implication is that a true soldier would never torture an enemy during wartime, even if they were ordered to do so by a commanding officer.

To be fair, Buzzell was blogging in 2004 and 2005, and the Iraqi insurgency had not yet not become a pressing issue for coalition forces. Given his fairly liberal political ideology, and his intensifying anti-war stance as his blog gets censored by the Pentagon brass, and his eventual (forced) re-enlistment in the army, it would be interesting to read his response to the Bush administration’s so-called “surge”. Nevertheless, it seems to me that *My War* derives much of its power not necessarily from any analyses, insightful or otherwise, of the situation in Iraq, but rather, from the way it highlights the very humdrum (for the most part) experience of being a soldier. Buzzell describes a *whole range of experiences* on his blog, and in this sense, it allows

him to connect much more easily with his readership. For those readers who are more interested in the everyday experiences of grunts in Iraq, there are posts like “To Hell With Observation Posts (OP)”, where Buzzell explains how boring being on patrol actually is: “a dum-dum retard explanation of an OP is when we go somewhere and hide out and wait for hours and hours for the ‘bad guys’ to show up and do something, if they do something, we’re there to send them to Allah and engage them with everything we’ve got. Sounds pretty cool, huh? Sounds exciting and fun right?”<sup>57</sup>. For those who enjoy a bit more excitement in their reading, Buzzell also provides detailed descriptions of intense firefights. One of his longest (actual) blog entries is devoted to telling the real story of the clashes in Mosul that left 12 Iraqis dead and 26 wounded. Here is a small snippet:

“We were driving down Route Tampa when all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys, edge of buildings, out of windows, everywhere, just came out of fucking nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPGS were flying at us from every single fucking direction. IEDs were being ignited on both sides of the street. I freaked the fuck out and ducked down in the hatch and I yelled over the radio, ‘HOLY SHIT! WE GOT FUCKIN’ HAJJIS ALL OVER THE FUCKIN’ PLACE!!! They’re all over goddammit!!!’”<sup>58</sup>.

In an earlier post, Buzzell argues that Iraq is “just as dangerous now as it ever has been”, and that “every time you leave the FOB you’re still entering the concrete jungle that’s filled with people who would love to kill you by any means necessary”<sup>59</sup>. Here, in Mosul, representation becomes reality. Route Tampa becomes a kill zone. Death (in the form of an AK bullet, an IED blast or an RPG) is everywhere: it is located behind tires, in alleyways, on top of buildings, out of windows, *everywhere*. More than anything, the battle is *confusing*:

“The smoke added to the confusion for me. As I was trying to orient myself, a loud explosion took place and it scared the shit out of me, because now it was apparent to me that we were next in line for an RPG, and somebody out there was definitely gunning at us. An RPG was fired at our vehicle from the building to our right, but it missed and landed about ten meters in front of us, but it missed and landed about ten meters in front of us. I couldn’t see where it came from, so I just pointed the gun towards the building where I thought the RPG had come from and just started pulling the trigger”<sup>60</sup>.

Here, we can see how, at least when describing the battlefield, Buzzell is more or less honest with the reader. He doesn’t let them forget how intensely terrifying and confusing a real

firefight is. At one point during the battle, he has to grab the extra cases of ammunition that are loaded on the outside of the vehicle, and in his own words, “I was shaking and scared out of my fuckin’ mind as I did this”<sup>61</sup>. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is also this honesty that draws readers to Buzzell’s blog. A couple of days after the firefight, he is forwarded an e-mail from Ed Fitzgerald, one of the original Green Berets” and had this to say about Buzzell’s “Men In Black” entry:

“That ‘green gunner’ captured vividly the total confusion, the terror of that situation he was suddenly thrown into. He shows us clearly something that is very true – the fact that in the middle of a firefight like that you can only track about 1/10 of what is happening...The way this guy described it (with all the warts – not sure what he is hitting most of the time, shooting too close to his own men, etc.) – that is indeed how it is in a situation like that. Too often, even in otherwise very well-written action books, there is no hint of that confused desperation which hits people when they are suddenly in it up to their eyebrows, with death or serious injury an all too real possibility”<sup>62</sup>.

What is particularly interesting about this entry is the fact that *My War* (a representation of Buzzell’s experiences as a soldier in Iraq) is compared favorably to action novels (fictional representations of the battlefield in general). This, I think, is the power of the blog: it makes it much easier for us, as journalists, academics, etc. to confuse reality with its representation. I am not suggesting that the events that Buzzell describes in *My War* did not take place. However, what we often forget, I think, is that bloggers such as Buzzell must necessarily *represent* the very real experiences that they blog about and that there is no easy, unproblematic way of transitioning from these representations to a concrete reality, or an empirical and objective ground truth.

*Colby Buzzell, for Esquire Magazine*

“Three years out of the army, diagnosed with PTSD, I recently got a nice letter from the Pentagon saying that they’d like me back in Iraq, pronto. They didn’t even mind that I was a little sick. And I’m not the only one”<sup>63</sup>.

Buzzell’s blog was essentially shut down by military officials after he posted a letter of support from the lead singer of the *Dead Kennedy’s*, Jello Biafra, a known anti-war activist. Reading Biafra’s letter, it is easy to see why Buzzell’s commanding officers would be highly displeased:

“Don’t believe the hype – we are the real patriots here, not the unelected gangsters and scam artists who started this war. Real patriots care enough about our country – and the world – to speak up, stand up, and fight back when the government breaks the law, lies, steals, and gets innocent people killed. Real patriots do their buddies and the people back home a huge favor when they bypass our censored corporate media and become the media themselves – telling us from a real person perspective what war and a grunt’s life are really like”<sup>64</sup>.

The reaction from Buzzell’s commanding officer, Robert Robinson II, was swift, and immediate:

“You need to stop posting. Your last post from the Jello Biafra has gotten the entire BDE staff up in Arms. You need to stop now, before Ltc. James and or Col. Rounds presses charges. You are looking at a minimum of a Field Grade Article 15 for violation of ART 104 UCMJ (Aiding the enemy) and ART 92 (Failure to follow a lawful order). This is a direct order from Ltc. James and myself for you to cease writing. For your own sake and to make a smooth transition out of the army, you should stop writing and just wait until you publish your book”<sup>65</sup>.

In the end, Buzzell’s fears became true: he was essentially disciplined and discharged from the army for maintaining a blog. What is particularly interesting about the commanding officer’s response, however, is the distinction that is drawn between writing a book and maintaining a blog. Robinson’s e-mail betrays not only the power of, but also the Pentagon’s interest in, the so-called “emerging media”: blogs, video diaries, YouTube, Skype, video-conferencing, Twitter, Facebook, etc. Books, apparently, are not quite as threatening as blogs: they cost money to purchase, they cannot be updated in real time, there is no interactivity between the “author” and his or her readership. Milblogs, however, can be censored, centralized, and controlled. As virtual “points of resistance” within a “broader network of power relations”, milblogs can still be subjected to the same (albeit more sophisticated and updated) microtechniques of power and discipline that are used to construct the modern army.

Although his blog was shut down, Buzzell has continued to write. He not only published *My War* as a book, but he has also been hired by *Esquire* magazine as a regular contributor. His first article, entitled “The Army Wants You...Again! (Yes, Really!)”, describes his brief recall to active duty (he was eventually deemed to be non-deployable due to post traumatic stress disorder). According to Buzzell, he was so desperate to prevent his redeployment that he went to

a Veterans Association psychologist and asked her to write a letter on his behalf, detailing his experiences with PTSD. Here is a small selection from this letter:

“Mr. Buzzell reported that he has tried very hard to ‘push out of his’ the aforementioned incident and many others since returning from Iraq. He reported that he drinks heavily every day as a way to avoid these traumatic memories...He is severely isolated, spending most of his day in his room and sometimes going for several days to weeks without speaking to anyone. Upon returning from Iraq, Mr. Buzzell and his wife divorced...When asked whether he has thoughts of harming or killing himself, Mr. Buzzell endorsed having a passive suicidal ideation...”<sup>66</sup>.

Much like the amateur photographer described by Salomon in *Waltz With Bashir*, Buzzell’s camera eventually broke. In Iraq, horror surrounded him, and he freaked out. Interestingly enough, it seems as though he was trying to “fix his camera” before he received news that he was being redeployed to Iraq. As he points out: “the only shooting I care to do from now on is *with my camera*, and I had just got done the long arduous process of getting my GI bill activated and signed up for photography classes down at the city college...”<sup>67</sup>.

Although Buzzell still frequently writes about the war for *Esquire*, he also goes on a hunt to find Banksy, a “guerilla street artist”, reviews clubs and restaurants, and goes on an unruly quest to make himself feel at home again in Los Angeles. It is clear that Buzzell, to paraphrase Cresswell, feels “out of place” in the United States; that “home” is not really “home” anymore<sup>68</sup>. Contrary to what army recruiter’s promise potential soldiers before their initial deployments in Iraq, a bright future after a career in the army is not guaranteed, and as a result, there exists a small, but steadily increasing number of Iraqi veterans who have formed or joined groups in order to oppose the War on Terror, to criticize the way it is being fought, and to condemn the ways in which the battlefield is represented in order to ensure a constant supply of fresh recruits<sup>69</sup>. In *Baghdad Burning*, Riverbend is also forced to stop blogging, and flee Iraq due to the intensifying conflicts in Baghdad’s mixed neighbourhoods. It is difficult to compare what has happened to Buzzell and Riverbend, particularly since *Baghdad Burning* has not been updated since October of 2007. However, it seems to me that some broader parallels can be drawn between the post-blog experiences of both individuals. Both are running away from violence; both have been dislodged from their lifeworlds, from the spaces that they used to call home; both have had their lives turned upside down by the spatialities of late modern warfare. In his critique of the colonial present, Gregory argues that, “for us to cease turning on the treadmill



of the colonial present – it will be necessary to explore other spatializations, and other topologies, and to turn our imaginative geographies into geographical imaginations that can enlarge and enhance our sense of the world and enable us to situate ourselves within it with care, concern, and humanity”<sup>70</sup>. It is my contention that we can begin to look for these alternative spatializations and topologies in the narratives constructed by bloggers such as Buzzell (and Riverbend); that by reading them together (for they must be read together), we can begin to understand the ways in which the prosecution of late modern warfare both shatters and connects the historical-geographies of what Ignatieff might call “distant strangers” around the globe<sup>71</sup>. Only then can we begin to imagine a world not wracked by the horrors of colonial violence.

***“Because Total Destruction is Beautiful”***

“yo. i was there. that was the most fun I had ever. blowing up houses in iraq rocks. any anti-war person out there needs to do what we were doing. Then you will love war and think it is fantastic. peace on earth”<sup>1</sup>.

“Iraq is not an enemy of the U.S. especially not the people of Iraq. For your information I am not a liberal. I believe in conserving the values of the Constitution of the united States of America above all unconstitutional war mongering. Save your insults for the playground. Your blind support for the war is un-American and goes against the wishes of the founding fathers”<sup>2</sup>.

“The clips are ours, the conclusions are yours”<sup>3</sup>.

In early March, 2007, the Iraqi Multi-National Force Iraq (MNFI) set up a YouTube channel entitled “Multi-National Force – Iraq” (MNFIRAQ) in order to give viewers around the world a “boots on the ground” perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom from those who are the most closely involved. According to MNFIRAQ, the 45 video clips posted on the channel “document action as it appeared to personnel on scene as it was shot...we will only edit video clips for time, security reasons, and/or overly disturbing or offensive images” (MNFIRAQ). Viewers browsing through the available clips on the MNFIRAQ channel are able to watch videos depicting “interactions” between Coalition troops and the Iraqi populace, teamwork between Coalition and Iraqi troops in the fight against terror, interesting eye-catching footage, and combat action. The very first clip, uploaded on March 7, 2007, shows coalition forces finding a vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) factory and destroying it as part of Operation Exelen. In contrast, the last clip, which was posted on December 15, 2008, shows footage of a visit of U.S. soldiers, civilians, and United Nations representatives to the Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul on November 22, 2008.

MNFIRAQ digitally captures and preserves but a moment of the long, drawn out “liberation” of Iraq. At the time that the 45 video clips were uploaded to YouTube, Iraq had been under foreign occupation for just under 4 years: an intensifying “Battle for Baghdad” was radically transforming the geographies of the city’s numerous ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, and in response, President George W. Bush ordered the controversial deployment of approximately 30,000 U.S. soldiers to Iraq – despite direct opposition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff – in order

to “secure the capital, hunt down al-Qaeda in the countryside, and, at least in theory, stop the violence long enough for the country’s Sunnis and Shi’ites to find common ground on power sharing”<sup>4</sup>. As a result, a new “command team” was executing presidential policy in Iraq, converting vague goals regarding security, democracy, and freedom into a “concrete hierarchy of military objectives and tasks”<sup>5</sup>. This is the Iraq of General David Petraeus (who replaced General Casey as the commander of MNFI on February 10, 2007); of Operation Imposing Law (or, perhaps unfortunately, O.I.L), a plan to help “demonstrate the legitimacy and effectiveness of the [new] Iraqi government by helping it establish the rule of law”, particularly in Baghdad; of Operation Phantom Thunder, a new set of military operations “focused on rooting out al-Qaeda terrorists and other extremist elements in order to provide security and stability for all Iraqis” around Baqubah, in the Diyala province, and in the Arab Jabour area<sup>6</sup>. This is also the Iraq of the so-called “cultural counterinsurgency”, a new type of conflict which requires “an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation”<sup>7</sup>. As McFate, a modern day Orientalist, argued, coalition forces were “fighting a complex war against an enemy they [did] not understand. The insurgents’ organizational structure [was] not military, but tribal. Their tactics [were] not conventional, but asymmetrical. Their weapons [were] not tanks and fighter planes, but improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They [did] not abide by the Geneva Conventions, nor [did] they appear to have any informal rules of engagement”<sup>8</sup>. In short, the war that was being fought in Iraq from 2005 onwards was, at least in some ways, completely different from the war that was begun at the Dora Farms complex on March 19, 2003.

More often than not, however, it seems to me that the clips on MNFIRAQ are made to *represent* Operation Iraqi Freedom in its entirety. It is perhaps unsurprising that the creation of the MNFIRAQ channel on YouTube.com occurred only one month before a new directive was issued by the U.S. army, which laid down a whole set of new rules governing the updating and the publishing of milblogs<sup>9</sup>. Not only were any Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNCI) units or personnel owning or desiring to own or maintain a website required to register with the unit chain of command, they were also required to clear any information that would eventually appear in the public domain (i.e., that is published upon their website) with a commanding officer<sup>10</sup>. Failure to comply with these new regulations could result in a court martial or even “administrative, disciplinary, contractual, or criminal action”. For some milbloggers, this was the “final nail in the coffin for combat blogging”: as retired paratrooper Matthew Burden points out, “no more military bloggers are writing about their experiences in the combat zone...This is

the best PR the military has – it’s most honest voice out of the war zone. And it’s being silenced”<sup>11</sup>. However, what “Army Regulation 530-1: Operational Security” (or OPSEC) allowed the Pentagon to do was to consolidate and to streamline its message: or, to control and to discipline that “almost endless chorus of unregulated voices” on the Internet, on blogs, and on YouTube.com that could “say just about anything”<sup>12</sup>. OPSEC gave the Pentagon the opportunity to become a player in the so-called “new media wars” and, as Donald Rumsfeld put it, adapt to an “era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, Blackberries, instant messaging, digital cameras, a global internet with no inhibitions, hand-held video cameras, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts [and] satellite television”<sup>13</sup>. With the creation of the MNFIRAQ YouTube.com channel (as well as the official DOD blog), the Pentagon can now provide its own representation of the “liberation of Iraq” and show the average Internet user what the conflict in Iraq is really like.

In this chapter, I am going to provide an analysis of the 45 video clips that have been uploaded to the MNFIRAQ YouTube.com channel (cf. Figure 3.1). More specifically, I am interested in thinking carefully about the ways in which each video clip helps construct a broader representation of Operation Iraqi Freedom to be disseminated throughout the Internet. Here, I will argue that this “broader representation of Operation Iraqi Freedom” is one that is not only consistent with a particular conceptualization of late modern warfare, but is also designed to provide “definitive” answers to various questions that have generally been of great interest to the Western public: What is battle like? What do soldiers do? Is anything getting done in Iraq? What does the local populace think of coalition forces? Are the good guys winning? Although some scholars suggest that MNFIRAQ, as an attempt by the U.S. Department of Defense to “counteract the prolific posting of damaging clips by its own troops”, adheres to “traditional” norms of propaganda, in the sense that it shows American soldiers succeeding in “clinical” combat and aiding local Iraqi citizens, I argue that this is a reading that glosses over one of the most important characteristics of an online video sharing website such as YouTube: the ability to interact with and respond to videos by sharing and disseminating home-made clips and/or text comments on a real time basis<sup>14</sup>. Thus, in addition to analyzing the MNFIRAQ videos in order to get a general sense of the ways in which the Pentagon/Department of Defense/U.S. Army chooses to represent Operation Iraqi Freedom to the American public (particularly the youth public), I will critically consider the comments and the response clips in order to provide a tentative answer to a key research question: how do online websites, such as YouTube,

necessarily reconfigure how we, as human geographers, think about what Chantal Mouffe might call the “space of the political”<sup>15</sup>?

*“This Isn’t Propaganda Lol”*

MNFI’s official YouTube channel was created on March 7, 2007. In the two years that it has been active, the channel has been viewed exactly 549 557 times, has acquired 8281 subscribers, and has added 488 friends, some of which include the prominent Filipino-American conservative blogger Michelle Malkin, the UK Ministry of Defence’s own YouTube channel, as well as the channel for the U.S. Air Force. By using some of YouTube’s features, it is easy to see which of the 45 videos were the most viewed and the most discussed by Internet users (cf. Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Clips Uploaded to MNFIRAQ Channel (August 6, 2009)

<i>Clip</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Upload Date</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq	March 10, 2007	2:56	4 120 266	2 117
2	Baghdad Firefight, March 2007	March 20, 2007	1:50	527 314	569
3	Insurgents surrender after gunship attack	June 21, 2007	2:07	417 550	278
4	Night Attack on Al-Qaeda	March 15, 2007	0:52	258 133	55
5	Long Day in Baqubah, March 22, 2007	March 28, 2007	1:40	242 482	301
6	Kidnap Victim Rescued, Baghdad, January 2007	April 2, 2007	2:10	234 776	428
7	Senior Terrorists Eliminated	July 24, 2007	0:55	132 102	167
8	Stryker Patrol Leads to Firefight	March 22, 2007	2:16	128 113	138
<i>Clip</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Upload Date</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Comments</i>
9	Night Raid Near Baqubah	March 9, 2007	1:33	111 767	151
10	Rounding Up Insurgents, March 2007	April 1, 2007	2:16	90 144	108
11	Taking Fire in Baqubah	April 5, 2007	2:32	77 673	136
12	500 lbs. bombs hit Al-Qaeda staging area	November 20, 2007	0:36	70 369	31

<i>Clip</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Upload Date</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Comments</i>
13	Counter-Mortar Operation	March 18, 2007	1:14	69 178	121
14	F/A 18 Hornets strike chlorine bomb truck	April 13, 2007	1:06	62 229	102
15	Fighting on the Rooftops, Tal Afar, Iraq	March 26, 2007	2:11	49 808	92
16	Destroying rocket launchers near Sadr City	June 7, 2007	1:13	46 764	54
17	More Fighting in Baqubah	May 3, 2007	1:51	43 923	83
18	Insurgent headquarters	August 1, 2007	1:57	39 845	151
19	Counter Attack	November 10, 2007	0:42	37 026	20
20	Close call for Marines	May 21, 2007	0:33	32 755	54
21	Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children	March 30, 2007	1:42	32 497	123
22	Anti-Iraqi forces, emplacements engaged	September 4, 2007	2:31	32 275	35
23	Iraqi Boy Scouts prepare for Jamboree	April 17, 2007	1:43	29 099	68
24	Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Part 2	April 20, 2007	3:01	28 174	36
25	F16s bomb IED factories, April 2007	May 13, 2007	0:44	26 984	57
26	Apache crews thwart rocket attack on IZ	July 7, 2007	1:10	26 657	38
27	Coalition investigates, then destroys IED factory	May 8, 2007	1:38	24 368	47
28	Apache helicopters fire on building	November 30, 2007	0:46	23 560	18
29	Soldiers Find Intel in Ramadi	March 21, 2007	0:48	21 910	28
30	Baghdad Building Destruction	March 12, 2007	1:01	19 348	11
31	Operation Exelen III, Feb. 25, 2007	March 7, 2007	1:40	19 099	33
32	Patrolling Baqubah, April 13, 2007	May 30, 2007	2:53	17 206	120
33	'Soft Knock' search in Baghdad	April 23, 2007	1:23	16 922	52
34	Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul	December 15, 2008	2:02	14 707	9

<i>Clip</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Upload Date</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Comments</i>
35	Destroying Chemical Factories, March 2007	April 9, 2007	2:18	14 693	47
36	Blowing up land mines	April 30, 2008	0:51	14 073	24
37	Kidnap Rescue	February 9, 2008	1:42	12 074	73
38	Apache Destroys Structure	March 17, 2008	0:40	10 178	12
39	Senior Terrorists (updated)	August 14, 2007	1:07	9 071	1
40	Apache Destroys Weapons Cache	April 6, 2008	0:43	8 610	8
40	Policing From Above	July 6, 2008	3:40	7 683	22
41	T-Wall Paintings, Baghdad, May 11, 2007	May 17, 2007	1:33	6 867	31
42	U.S. troops aid Iraqi VBIED victims	April 30, 2007	2:34	6 814	44
43	Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways	December 14, 2008	2:24	4 602	10
44	IRTN Station Opening, Diyala, March 26, 2007	March 28, 2007	3:12	1 736	10

In his analysis of MNFIRAQ, Christensen compiles a similar ranking based upon the number of views that each video clip has received so far<sup>16</sup>. However, at the time that Christensen was writing, only 29 video clips had been uploaded to MNFIRAQ's YouTube channel, and thus his sample size is smaller than my own. Second, I also viewed each clip twice, each time noting 1) the date uploaded 2) the official description given 3) the length 4) the number of views and 5) my own personal observations. Furthermore, it is interesting to briefly compare the two tables in order to see if the popularity of certain video clips has increased or decreased over time (just over two years). Some video clips have seen their hits increase dramatically over time, with the three most obvious being "Insurgent headquarters" (which jumped from 657 views to 39845), "Senior Terrorists Eliminated" (which jumped from 8738 views to 132 102, climbing 17 spots on the ranking) as well as "Insurgents Surrender after Gunship Attack" (which climbed 8 spots in the ranking, and acquired approximately 370 000 new hits). Although the ranking order of the top 10 videos shifted around a little bit, a quick scan of both tables highlights the fact that clips depicting street fighting and gun battles (to use Christensen's classification scheme) have consistently scored the highest number of views.

A surprising number of YouTube users have accused MNFIRAQ of “acting” out or “staging” the clips that have been uploaded to the channel. For example, in the video entitled “Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq”, NickRoller states that “if you people were any smarter, you would know that 2/3 of this tape is acted out”<sup>17</sup>. But how is it even possible to tell whether these clips are acted out or not? For some YouTube users, some of the behaviours and/or the actions depicted in the video clips simply do not make sense. For instance, in “Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq”, American snipers and infantry from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stryker Brigade team have supposedly teamed up with Iraqi soldiers from the 6<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Division and are providing covering fire from a high vantage point (probably an abandoned building). However, according to FrettiYetti, something is not quite right: “the 50 cal guy is shooting level from a high building...the sniper before him has the camo screen over his scope...either ignorants at work or fake you decide” (cf. Figure 3.2)<sup>18</sup>. There is, however, no way of accurately verifying these claims: although it is true that one of the snipers using a 0.50 caliber sniper rifle (one of the largest and most powerful sniper rifles on the market designed to take out armored personnel carriers, fortified bunkers, and helicopters) is firing level (or in other words, not aiming downwards as he should be), there is also no way of telling whether or not the soldiers depicted in the video are actually above ground level at all, as the video camera only focuses upon a small section of the room that they are in<sup>19</sup>. As such, it is quite easy for pro-war YouTube users to defend these clips as legitimate representations of a firefight in Baghdad. As tubub points out:

“lmao! All u people saying this is fake, UR WRONG! I actually thought it was fake in and towards the beginning also. But, when i saw the part with the two guys shootin ak47s then i remembered seeing tht on the news as a clip from iraq. They are using aks so they can save their own ammunition. Jesus its not fucking complicated. This isnt propaganda. lol! Everything is propaganda to u guys. Even fucking toothpaste commercials to u can be swung as prop. So plz. shutup”<sup>20</sup>.

This “discussion” (for lack of a better term) also takes place in the comments section of some of the other MNFIRAQ videos. For instance, there is one clip entitled “Kidnap Rescue”, where the Iraqi Security Forces rescue an 11-year-old-boy being held by “terrorists” for ransom. In response to DARKJOSE06’s claim that the video is a fake, jasonlee334 argues/replies: “fake?! are u kidding the armor that they are wearing and stuff arnt cheap. So the only way it is fake is if bored rich people were really bored and bothered to find ARMY armor”<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, in a video entitled “Rounding Up Insurgents, March 2007”, some users drew parallels between the 45



uploaded video clips and big budget Hollywood films. For individuals such as maxfun01, MNFIRAQ is a bad producer who hires an incompetent director to work with boring actors (i.e., the soldiers) to create a story which has no thrill. RamzGT's reply is particularly instructive: "producer? This is real life man...the guy's not trying to win an emmy – he's trying to *accurately portray the lives of soldiers in Iraq*"<sup>22</sup>.

The tight connections between the inner workings of Hollywood and the waging of late modern warfare have been well documented, and thus, there is no need to explore this issue in any great detail<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that RamzGT's reply speaks to the ways in which the successful spatialization of colonial modernity necessarily blurs the distinction between reality and its representation<sup>24</sup>. Here, maxfun01's conceptualization of the MNFIRAQ clips as small "movies", each with its own director, producer, actors, and storyboard, is more useful than RamzGT's assumption of perfect one-to-one correspondence between "real life" and the video clips. Indeed, standard cinematographic techniques are used in each of the video clips in order to maximize the viewing experience: fade outs, splices, inserted text, slideshow images, subtitles, etc<sup>25</sup>. Almost like advertisements, they are short (there is only one clip that is longer than three minutes), snappy, and direct, designed to quickly capture and hold your attention. As such, it is hardly surprising that many commentators dismiss the MNFIRAQ video clips as nothing but propaganda, especially the one showing coalition soldiers distributing soccer balls and candy donated by American school children to youngsters in Iraq. Some viewers, such as thundercow99, even go so far as to draw parallels between MNFIRAQ and Nazi leaders such as Hitler and Goebbels: "It's a happy world of soccer balls and rainbows! I am not fooled by this transparent propaganda. Hitler and Goebbels did the same thing. There is a nazi film showing happy children in a concentration camp eating candy. God have mercy on us"<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, many of the YouTube users commenting upon this particular video (entitled "Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children") seem to be incredibly preoccupied with figuring out whether this portrayal of soldiers as peace-loving humanitarians is propaganda or not (cf. Figure 3.3). Some commentators, such as freakshowfreak, are realistic: "You can say whatever you like, no matter how you spin it, it is a 'Winning the hearts and minds' campaign. We did the same thing when I was there. Yes its to pass along a gift, but also to buy them off so they dont toss gernades or other explosives at us or into our compound". Others, such as lolosis9 are much more charitable: "Ours is the only military in the world where, when children see them coming, they run towards them"<sup>27</sup>.

Even the more serious videos depicting street battles, raids, and patrols have been subjected to similar critiques by skeptical viewers. According to some viewers, such as growlroo or bilkobilko, a video clip depicting “More Fighting in Baqubah” is nothing more than sanitized, “pointless propaganda”, for all it shows is some GIs scurrying around and shooting their weapons at invisible enemies: as wallyworld points out, “you’re only going to see the soldiers portrayed as heroes here”<sup>28</sup>. Commentators, such as GregoryPurcell, are also quick to pick up on the implications of other Pentagon decisions concerning the wartime dissemination of information on blogs, and on the Internet: “Why is the pentagon making Videos and posting them on You tube? And telling the troops themselves no more blogging? Hey propaganda guy who will scrub this comment...You cannot sell a losing occupation to America forever”<sup>29</sup>. Here, it is being suggested that ultimately, the MNFIRAQ channel is *reactionary* in that all of the video clips that it hosts are crafted in such a way in order to dampen, if not block, the so-called “YouTube effect”: or, more specifically in the case of Iraq, to prevent coalition forces from uploading their own video clips, or publishing their own blog entries, that might portray them as *anything* but patriotic heroes who would do anything to spread peace and democracy in Iraq<sup>30</sup>. For some viewers, such as Tamryn69, MNFIRAQ is thus nothing more than Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)

“targeted for U.S. population consumption. The militay industry is making too much money to let US public opinion go south. It's standard procedure to stir the male ego with nationalistic/patriotic images, and utilize outright LIES to sway opinion. I was in the first oil war, I saw this all firsthand. This video is to qualm US concern over WAR CRIMES... I said this war was a farce before it even started”<sup>31</sup>.

Here, the most obvious example is the Abu Ghraib scandal. It is not difficult to imagine the MNFIRAQ channel being specifically designed to counter the very real, and damaging consequences of the Abu Ghraib photographs. Unfortunately for the Pentagon, Abu Ghraib is not an isolated incident. As Christensen points out, video clips have been posted on YouTube showing F16 fighter pilots deliberately firing missiles into crowded groups of people without following proper target identification procedures, while others depict U.S. soldiers dangling bottles of clean water over the back of their truck while driving, and laughing as Iraqi children struggle to grab them (cf. Figure 3.4)<sup>32</sup>. The MNFIRAQ channel is also responding to bloggers such as Daniel Goetz or Colby Buzzell who openly blog about their disillusionment with not

only the Pentagon, but the U.S. government. Every soldier shown in the video clips does his or her job without complaint; they are always professional, as well as personable; they are the most patriotic of Americans for they are willing to put their lives on the line for their country.

Here, the importance of representation cannot be under-estimated. As Andersen points out:

“War is understood and interpreted, justified and judged through the images and narratives that tell the stories of war. Most civilians experience military conflict through the signs and symbols of its depiction, their impressions not derived from the battles in distant lands but from the manner they are rendered at home<sup>33</sup>.”

Christensen stresses that all clips, whether they are uploaded by MNFIRAQ, by U.S. soldiers, or by Iraqi insurgents “all tell certain stories about Iraq”, and as such it is “impossible to gauge how representative the ‘clean’ MNFIRAQ videos are vis-à-vis the ‘dirty’ alternative videos”<sup>34</sup>.

However, Christensen’s arguments still functions through a series of binaries that need to be called into question to ensure a careful and critical reading of the MNFIRAQ clips: clean and dirty, revealed and hidden, consonance and dissonance, hero and terrorist, America and the rest of the world. Here, it seems to me that taken-for-granted spacings between reality and its representation, and as such, the prerequisites for the spatialization of colonial modernity, are left undisturbed<sup>35</sup>. Particularly in a discursive space such as YouTube, it is impossible to bridge the gap between reality and its representation due to the fact that, to paraphrase Mitchell, there exists only further representations of the real (television, video responses, written commentary, comparisons to movies or video games, etc.) outside of the initial “exhibition”. Thus, in the next section of this paper, I will consider two basic questions. First, how is the Pentagon’s representation of Operation Iraqi Freedom received by YouTube users? And second, how does YouTube itself function as a space of discursive politics? By completely ignoring the comments section of each MNFIRAQ video clip, Christensen fails to consider how the “stories” (both individually, as well as collectively are received, and thus, glosses over an opportunity to think about some of the general ways in which the deployment of these discursive constructs has set, to a certain extent, the a priori ground rules of American political debate concerning Operation Iraqi Freedom. By reading and watching the viewers’ reaction to the posted video clips and comments, we can begin to understand the ways in which, despite the impossibility of verifying the accuracy of either the “clean” or “dirty” video clips, representations of late modern warfare are made very real to the Western public via further representations of the so-called “real”.

*“You Think We Are Sitting on a Partical Laser, You Have No Idea”*

“I was there too. It was what it was”<sup>36</sup>.

MNFIRAQ is not only the name for a YouTube channel that hosts different video representations of the war in Iraq from the Pentagon’s point of view. It can also be thought of as an assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari first introduced the concept of an assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus* in order to think about how two or more singularities which have something in common might arrange themselves (or be arranged together) in such a way that blurs the subject/object dichotomy, and yet, still retain their original specificity<sup>37</sup>. For Deleuze and Guattari, a book, “made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds”, constitutes an assemblage”<sup>38</sup>. However, it is also possible to speak of “human” or “social” assemblages, and thus, the term has become very useful for actor-network theorists interested in understanding the ways in which different heterogeneous entities relate to each other<sup>39</sup>. As an assemblage, MNFIRAQ brings together objects (digital cameras, camcorders, etc.) with technology (the Internet, YouTube.com, wifi, etc.) and discourses (Orientalism, propaganda, cultural counterinsurgency). People, however, are also crucial. In a double sense, people are MNFIRAQ’s *raison d’être*. On the one hand, the channel itself was created in order to provide people around the globe with the so-called “boots on the ground” perspective on Operation Iraq Freedom. On the other hand, the MNFIRAQ channel was created by a YouTube user of the same name, which means that there is also a person (or a group of people) that has been tasked with maintaining the channel: he or she must moderate the comments for each video clip; he or she must choose which new video clips can be uploaded to the channel based upon their content (are they too violent? Do they depict “controversial subjects”? etc.)<sup>40</sup>. Thus, one could draw parallels between the role of MNFIRAQm, and the role of the White House Press Secretary: he or she must act as a liaison between MNFIRAQ, and the general American public. What is particularly fascinating about this avatar is that he or she will reply comments on the video clip discussion threads from time to time. Mostly, MNFIRAQm simply clarifies some of the information that has already been presented, or answers questions that users might have. For example, some YouTube users, such as Synthe, make requests of MNFIRAQm: “mnf if that’s you’re real name, show us some M1 Abrams tank action”. MNFIRAQm, of course, was happy to oblige, and replied “you got it Synthe, as soon as the armor units send us some of their footage. We only run what we have”<sup>41</sup>. Interestingly enough, since this exchange took place, no footage of the M1 Abrams tank, or of any kind of mobile armor, has been uploaded to the

channel. It is difficult to ascertain, simply from reading MNFIRAQm's own comments, what the specific guidelines for uploading new material to the channel are. Nevertheless, it becomes increasingly clear that MNFIRAQm routinely scrutinizes and censors video content on a more or less regular basis. In response to one viewer who criticized MNFIRAQm for not uploading any video clips showing the "reality of war" (in other words, "dead people"), he or she notes that "YouTube would remove any video like that immediately....this channel has already had two clips removed for content"<sup>42</sup>. What is particularly fascinating about this exchange is the way in which MNFIRAQm essentially abdicates responsibility for the censorship of its video clips and transfers the blame squarely onto the shoulders of the host website, YouTube.

By participating in the discussion and replying to posted comments, it seems to me that MNFIRAQm attempts to humanize MNFIRAQ, causing no small amount of confusion amongst the general YouTube viewing population. Bookhound63's comment on the video clip entitled "Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq" demonstrates the extent to which the boundaries between user and institution begin to be fuzzed: "MNFIRAQ, your video just makes me care more about our young men fighting over there...*I hope you will ask your friends who are serving* to check out my tributes and news spoofs"<sup>43</sup>. MNFIRAQm does not make or produce the video clips that have been placed on the YouTube channel, and yet MNFIRAQ, the institution, does not have "friends" completing a tour of duty in Iraq. Furthermore, MNFIRAQm is unabashedly pro-America and pro-Israel when it comes to any sort of general discussion regarding the War on Terror. At one point in the "Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq" thread, MNFIRAQm calls another user, "RudolphHessHero", a "total anti-semite". Another user, anzac68, suggests that "being 'anti-semite' is not necessarily anti-jew", for a 'Semite' "is someone from the Palestine/Israel region i.e., Muslim/Jew, Arab/Israeli", and in response, MNFIRAQm quotes the Webster's Dictionary definition of anti-Semitism and notes: "I find it troubling to believe that you're using a weak semantic argument about word definitions to defend someone with the screen name 'RudolphHessHero' who posts videos on his channel with titles such as 'Understand Hitler'"<sup>44</sup>. It is, I think, revealing, that MNFIRAQm is quick to shut down any comments that he or she deems to be "anti-Semitic", and yet, fails to respond in a similar manner (in fact, fails to respond at all) to the innumerable amounts of virulent racism that is directed at the people of Iraq on a consistent basis in the video clip comments sections. Terms such as "sand niggers", "Islamnazis", "Mujis",

Terms such as “Hajjis”, “towelheads”, and “turkis” are frequently used to reference any “hostile” Muslim in the video clips. One example, taken from the video clip entitled “Insurgents surrender after gunship attack, June 15, 2007”, comes from celticmercenary, who argues that the “Apache should have mowed them all down, regardless of white flag...*They don’t deserve to live, muslim vermin*”<sup>45</sup>. Although one user, damianourru, described this comment as being “fascist”, another viewer, JWTX, promptly suggested that he could guess damianourru’s “past history” (i.e., he was clearly a terrorist islamo-fascist), and told him to “go take a trip to Syria, or somewhere”<sup>46</sup>. Here, two familiar tropes are being deployed. First, anyone who opposes America’s war of peace, justice, and freedom must be a Muslim. The second, however, is much more subtle, and it is a theme that I hope to return to near the end of this paper. Here, it is revealing that JWTX does not tell damianourru to “go take a trip to *Iraq*, or somewhere”, for it speaks to the ways in which the insurgents fighting against coalition forces are always characterized as being foreign fighters from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, etc: apparently, true Iraqis welcome American soldiers with open arms, and shower them with gifts and gratitude. However, there is at least one occasion where one of MNFIRAQm’s replies to a comment that was posted in response to the video clip “Stryker Patrol Leads to Firefight” highlights the extent to which the micro-techniques of disciplinary power diffuse even through the World Wide Web:

Tenretni5317: “That’s my brigade, since that month 43 soldiers have not returned to service including myself. All you judgemental jodi be lucky there are men who allow you to stay up late pulling it without worry.”

MNFIRAQ: “tenretni5317: By ‘have not returned to service’, do you mean deserted?”

Tenretni5317: “Neg. at Walter reed lost leg.”

MNFIRAQ: “Oh Ok. You used some really unfortunate terminology there (I’m speaking from experience here. Usually when people say ‘have not returned’ instead of ‘unable to return’ it suggests they did it by choice). Get better and get out of there ASAP. You’ve got our best wishes. Stay strong”<sup>47</sup>.

As the U.S. Military’s Punitive Article 85 states, desertion is a serious offense, especially during a time of war: the maximum punishment for a completed or attempted desertion with intent to avoid hazardous duty or to shirk important service is dishonourable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and confinement for 5 years. Article 85 even stipulates that desertion during time of war may result in “death or other such punishment as a court-martial may direct”<sup>48</sup>.

MNFIRAQm, may be but a simple node situated within a broader network of power relations, but on the YouTube boards, she or he still commands a position of authority as the de-facto, faceless representative of MNFI. The very fact that tenretni5317 was asked whether a desertion did in fact take place suggests, it seems to me, that further action was going to be pursued should the answer have been positive. Certainly, the Pentagon has the means to trace tenretni5317 through the Internet (by tracking Internet Provider addresses, for instance), to reconstruct a profile containing pertinent biopolitical information, and to effect punishment accordingly. What this little exchange demonstrates is the extent to which a website like YouTube is, for all intents and purposes, a highly controlled, regulated, and disciplined space. This is a control that not only applies to the posting of videos, or the writing of comments, but also, on some special occasions, fuzzes the virtual/reality and intrudes into the lifeworlds of its users.

Furthermore, how MNFIRAQm, presents herself or himself on the discussion boards of each of the video clips dictates, in part, how, the Pentagon's message will be received by the general viewing public. Interestingly, one reaction to the footage presented in the MNFIRAQ channel, such as "Apache crews thwart rocket attack on IZ", has been to compare the battlefield to a video game: as dickbutkiss2 notes, "niiiiice! looks like a video game LoL"<sup>49</sup>. On at least two different occasions, video clips are compared to a game that was developed by Infinity Ward, and subsequently published by Activision, called *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Although the game itself takes place in a fictional near future, it is, appropriately enough, half of it is set in the Middle East, where a radical ultranationalist leader has launched a coup d'état. According to Activision's publishing CEO, Mike Griffith, *Call of Duty 4* has demonstrated mass-market appeal on a global scale: since its release in 2007, it has sold approximately 13 million copies worldwide<sup>50</sup>. The game has even been parodied on the FOX animated television series *Family Guy*, firmly solidifying its status as a popular culture phenomenon<sup>51</sup>. It is thus unsurprising that viewers, in an attempt to draw upon their own personal experiences to make sense of MNFIRAQ's video clips, would compare the war footage shown on the channel to *Call of Duty* 4. What is more interesting is the fact that, of the 45 video clips posted by MNFIRAQ, the comparisons invariably focus upon two: "Apache Helicopters Fire on Building" and "Senior Terrorists Eliminated". As users such as Mr. Yoseef and gsdpm put it, these video clips are like the "Helicopter mission", or "Stage 5" in *Call of Duty 4*, due to the fact that both them have been captured through the viewfinder of a thermal imaging gunship:

Figure 3.1 MFNIRAQ

YouTube English ▼ Sign Up | QuickList | Help | Sign In  
Videos | Channels | Community | Upload

Videos | Playlists | Groups | Friends | Subscribers | Subscriptions

### Multi-National Force - Iraq Subscribe

**MFNIRAQ**  
Joined: March 07, 2007  
Last Sign In: 3 months ago  
Videos Watched: 968  
Subscribers: 8,336  
Channel Views: 555,900

The clips are ours, the conclusions are yours.

The Multi-National Force - Iraq YouTube channel gives viewers around the world a "boots on the ground" perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom from those who are most closely involved.

Video clips document action as it appeared to personnel on scene as it was shot. We will only edit video clips for time, security reasons, and/or overly disturbing or offensive images.

What you will see on this channel:

- Interaction between Coalition troops and the Iraqi populace.
- Teamwork between Coalition and Iraqi troops in the fight against terror.
- Interesting, eye-catching footage
- Combat action

What we will NOT post on this channel:

- Profanity
- Sexual content
- Overly graphic, disturbing or offensive material
- Footage that mocks Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces or the citizens of Iraq.

This YouTube channel is brought to you by [www.mnf-iraq.com](http://www.mnf-iraq.com), the official Web site of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

City: Baghdad  
Country: Iraq  
Website: <http://www.mnf-iraq.com>

#### Connect with MFNIRAQ

Send Message  
Share Channel  
Add to Google  
<http://www.youtube.com/MFNIRAQ>

Embed This Channel:  
`<script src="http://www.gmodules.com/gm?ifru=http://www.google.com/gmodules">`

#### Recent Activity

MFNIRAQ uploaded a new video (9 months ago)

Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul  
U.S. Soldiers challenge and

### Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul

From: MFNIRAQ  
Views: 16,202  
Comments: 9

#### Videos (45)

Subscribe to MFNIRAQ's videos

Videos | Most Viewed | Most Discussed

Video Title	Duration	Views	Time Ago	Rating
Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul	2:02	16,196	9 months ago	★★★★★
Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways	2:26	4,985	9 months ago	★★★★★
Policing from Above	3:41	7,799	1 year ago	★★★★★
Blowing up land mines	0:51	14,478	1 year ago	★★★★★
Apache Destroys Weapons Cache	0:43	8,720	1 year ago	★★★★★
Apache Destroys Structure	0:40	10,432	1 year ago	★★★★★




Figure 3.2. “Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq”

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### Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq



5,255 ratings 4,172,795 views

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Statistics & Data

Video Responses (6)

Sign in to post a Video Response

View All - Play All

Text Comments (2,117) Options

Sign in to post a Comment

panzermiskolc (1 year ago) Reply -1 0 0  
freaks!

angryfudgepop (2 years ago) Reply +54 48 0  
that 50 cal is a barett rifle it can go throw a 12 in plate of steel

gentoodaemon (2 years ago) Reply -1 0 0  
what part of the video are you referring to? I believe those are the iraqi troops.

superwoofier2007 (2 years ago) Reply +37 07 0  
Imao... that 50. shockwave was tearing up that room

patriotmyass (2 years ago) Reply -1 0 0

MNFIRAQ  
March 10, 2007  
(more info)

American infantry and snipers from the U.S. Army's 3rd Stryker Brigade team up with Iraqi soldiers from the 6th Iraqi Army Division during a firefight on Baghdad's notorious Haifa Street, January 2...

URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntNORX0>

Embed: `<object width="429" height="344">gagan`

More From: MNFIRAQ

- Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul 16,196 views
- Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways 4,965 views
- Policing from Above 7,799 views
- Blowing up land mines 14,478 views
- Apache Destroys Weapons Cache 8,720 views

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- KBR Convoy Ambushed in Iraq 1,938,127 views carterweb
- Lost & Ambushed in Baghdad 242,308 views whiterose65
- Close Combat in Iraq 1,051,148 views




Figure 3.3 “Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children”

YouTube

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Subscriptions History Upload

### Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children

32,955 views

0:28 / 1:42

Favorite Share Playlists Flag

Facebook MySpace Live Spaces (more share options)

Statistics & Data

Video Responses (1)

Sign in to post a Video Response

Text Comments (123) Options

Sign in to post a Comment

GeneralBerger (7 months ago)

Go America!!

barrera222 (1 year ago)

yeah some soldiers are nice but some are so cruel to the kids

SoldiersGint35g (1 year ago)

wow, I cant believe some of these comments, all those kids have is the hope that American troops will help bring them freedom, you people have no idea.

Klcloud1 (1 year ago)

how can all you people look at a goodact and judge and betray your own people, you make me sick, I salute these brave men and women, they are the best america has to offer and if it wasnt for my damned hip I would be standing there right beside them this very moment, god bless the troops, god bless america.

sajjudi (1 year ago)

I am Iraqi and I love american they are the best thanks


More From: MNFIRAQ

- Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul 16,190 views
- Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways 4,890 views
- Policing from Above 7,799 views
- Blowing up land mines 54,478 views
- Apache Destroys Weapons Cache 6,720 views

Related Videos

- Iraqi children and US Troops 65,131 views
- Iraq children future terrorists or allies 12,090 views
- U.S. Soldiers playing soccer in football with Ir... 6,792 views
- soccer with Iraqi kids 219,960 views
- US Soldiers torture Iraq Children... 625,771 views
- Marines Interact With Iraqi Children 10,718 views
- Iraqi children and US Troops

More Popular News Videos



0:28 / 1:42

Figure 3.4 “US Soldiers Taunting Iraqi Children w/ Water Bottle”

YouTube - US Soldiers taunting Iraqi ...

U.S. soldiers water bottles Iraq

Search

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Subscriptions History Upload

Home Videos Channels

US Soldiers taunting Iraqi children w/ bottle water

0:31 / 1:19

16,520 views

Favorite Share Playlists Flag

Facebook MySpace Live Spaces (more share options)

Statistics & Data

Video Responses (0)

Sign in to post a Video Response

Text Comments (215) Options

Sign in to post a Comment

CommunismAsia (3 days ago)

subhuman yanks

pimpmyfridge (6 days ago)

lol this guys blaming Iraq for that. thats just wrong

oviraptor66 (6 days ago)

I wish some mujaheddin make your daughter (if you ever have one) running 2 miles under a scorching sun just for fun then ask you if you noticed anything wrong, you proud American idiot.

Troy305Dillon (5 days ago)

you should just shut up. The kid got a huge bottle of water. you act like we forced him to run. You proud anti american retard.

oviraptor66 (5 days ago)

People like you make America to be hated all across the world. You are too lame to understand a single word I said so you tell me to shut up.

Skrydstrup (2 days ago)

You're right. After my opinion this soldier shouldn't have been in the army, he is way too unprofessional and after my opinion embarrassing. And no, they

More From: TFLF21C

Related Videos

Iraqi kids dancing and fighting. 4,402 views

US Soldier David Mortari Kills Puppy, Throws 1,051,507 views

Iraqi kid learning some great english 949,242 views

Soldiers scaring Iraqi children 294,720 views

US MARINE THROWS PUPPY OFF CLIFF, David Mortari 771,013 views

Americans teach Iraqi children to say "Bomb Iraq" 252,855 views

American soldiers taunt 1,000,000 views

More Popular News Videos



Figure 3.5 “Senior Terrorists Eliminated”

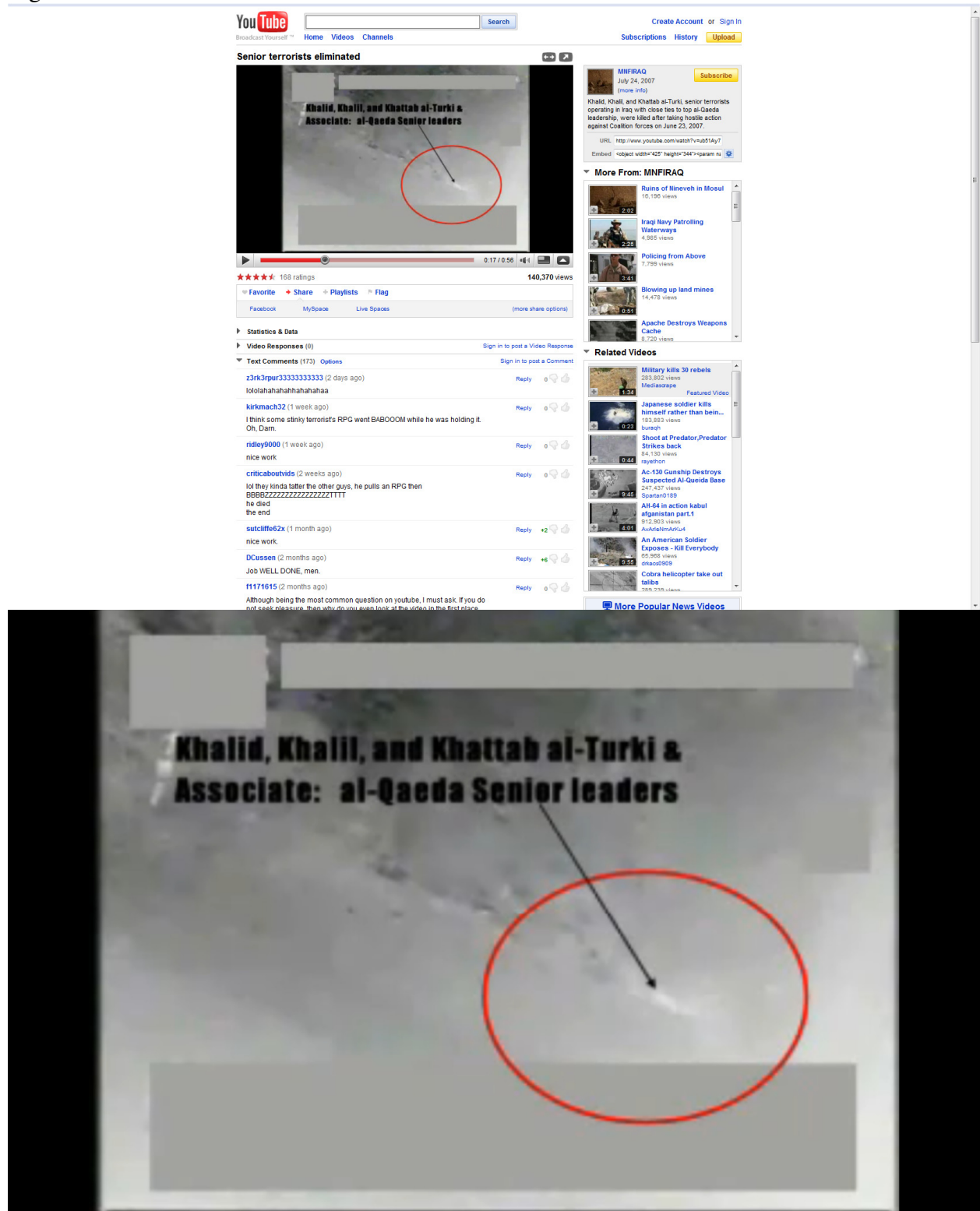




Figure 3.6 “Long Day in Baqubah”

YouTube

Home Videos Channels

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Subscriptions History Upload

Long Day in Baqubah, March 22, 2007

0:36 / 1:41

243,488 views

Favorite Share Playlists Flag

Facebook MySpace Live Spaces

Statistics & Data

Video Responses (9)

Text Comments (301)

PositivePractice (7 months ago)

respect heroes

dutchyuy (2 years ago)

love amercial! (i'm dutch) fock all the manafackars that this is a bad war its a good war its for your own freedom... your sitting back home watching your pc and say that the americans ar bad well get your ashes down there and you know that this is a good war...

shihany2 (2 years ago)

If there there are American soldiers write I the Russian soldier

macch530 (2 years ago)

did anyone notice the tracer round that missed the soldiers head by about a foot

demon212 (1 year ago)

Yeah that was insane.

Toasty789 (2 years ago)

"in 0:35 soldier almost shot in the head hehehehe!"you sick son of a bitch i hope you burn in hell

crashdummy713 (2 years ago)

and they'll have rocks hahaha.

More From: MNFIRAQ

Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul

Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways

Policing from Above

Blowing up land mines

Apache Destroys Weapons Cache

Related Videos

Battle of Suhriz - 2004 (P.2)

Insurgent sniper almost shot me in Baqubah.

Canadian Army In Heavy Firefight in Afghanistan...

US Troops Under Heavy Fire in Baqubah, Northeast...

Fallujah uncut

WAR - A first hand perspective (A must see!)

Combat

Figure 3.7 “Close Call for the Marines”

YouTube

Home Videos Channels

Subscriptions History Upload

This video may not be suitable for minors.

### Close call for Marines

0:28 / 0:33

32,928 views

Favorite Share Playlists Flag

Send Video Facebook MySpace

Statistics & Data

Video Responses (0)

Text Comments (54)

managrey (1 year ago)  
This video Just proves our boys will go thru hell to defend this country!

FtHf (1 year ago)  
YEEEEEEEEHAAAAAWW Rockon boys

memorex3248 (2 years ago)  
Holy shit! God damn that was a close one!  
WTF did they hit anyways?

n yeah delta i saw that to.

mattoc83 (2 years ago)  
that was sweet

RamzGT (2 years ago)  
why was this flagged?

tlucuzi (2 years ago)  
sob thats crazy

rapexpod (2 years ago)  
thanks for upload.

More From: MNFIRAQ

Ruins of Nineveh in Mosul  
16,190 views

Iraqi Navy Patrolling Waterways  
4,800 views

Policing from Above  
7,799 views

Blowing up land mines  
4,473 views

Apache Destroys Weapons Cache  
6,720 views

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6,900,543 views

Artillery Accident  
1,080,081 views

Incompetent Terrorists  
32,229 views

Mortar Close Call  
55,038 views

Iraq Sniper Attacks US Troops  
2,082,431 views

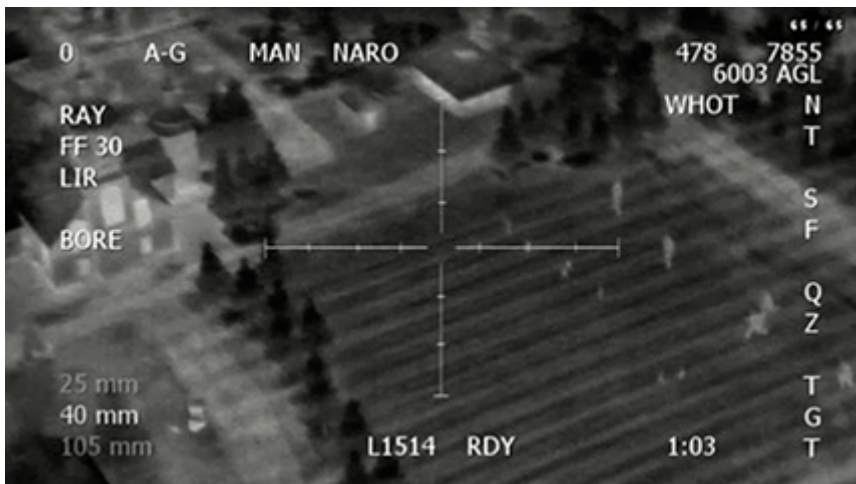
Battle on Hafa Street, Baghdad, Iraq  
4,172,795 views

Counter Ambush Operation with Charlie Co  
23,409 views

the enframed landscape is displayed in different shades of grey, there is a giant crosshair in the middle of the screen, and important quantitative data (presumably) lines the border of the shot (cf. Figure 3.5)<sup>52</sup>.

As it turns however, there is no “Helicopter mission” in *Call of Duty 4*, nor does “Stage 5” involve aerial combat. What Mr. Yoseef and gsdpm are most likely referring to is the eighth level of the game, entitled “Death From Above”, where, according to the game’s Wiki page, “the player, assuming the role of a gunner on an AC-130H Spectre, protects Captain Price and his team...as they make their way through an enemy-controlled village, clearing out enemy defenses, and offering some powerful close air support as the SAS commandos make their way to the extraction point by foot and by truck”<sup>53</sup>.

Figure 3.8 *Call of Duty 4*



Although the developer Infinity Ward tried to make the level as realistic as possible (for instance, by making the TV-screen shudder when the player fires the AC-130H’s gatling gun), other YouTube users were not amused by these comparisons. As Bushy33 put it: “ya say it's like a game next time you're with me in a humvee and we get ambushed. don't worry i'll be there to protect you tho i'm sure you'd just hide”<sup>54</sup>. If Mr. Yoseef and gsdpm are fuzzing the taken-for-granted boundaries that divide reality from its representation, Busy33 is keen to solidify them and leave them intact: here, he suggests that no game, despite claims to hyper-realism, can replicate, or even prepare someone for, the experience of late modern warfare. This paper is not going to explore the intricacies of these claims in any great detail. However, it is worth pointing

out that, as Der Derian points out, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which the entertainment industry has become increasingly involved in military projects. Indeed, simulations and models have become a key component of the Pentagon's plan to become the next "War-Mart". Some simulations model complex 3d urban terrains; others train soldiers to kill, still others help new recruits and diplomats become acquainted with the finer details of "cultural counterinsurgency"<sup>55</sup>. The extent to which these interlocking simulations of late modern warfare (as exemplified by Operation Iraqi Freedom), all of them referencing and feeding off of each other, have almost trumped the importance of the material battlefield speaks volumes about the ways in which the production of the colonial modern organizes the world endlessly in order to further represent itself<sup>56</sup>.

There are other examples that I could draw upon to further prove this point: there is, for instance, the occasional Counterstrike reference to the Iraqi insurgents as "campers", and as "n00bs" who have been "pwned"<sup>57</sup>. However, "reality" (for lack of a better term) invariably intrudes, often in potentially dangerous ways. Although MNFIRAQ has not posted any video clips with gruesome footage (even the clip showing soldiers providing medical assistance to the victims of a car bomb explosion was extremely clinical), there are at least two occasions where viewers see coalition forces, who are usually depicted as being calm, cool, collected, and in control of all situations, narrowly escaping death. One video clip, entitled "Close Call for Marines", shows soldiers looking for insurgent artillery posts in Al Anbar province being forced to dodge high velocity explosion debris by quickly dropping to the ground. Sometimes, the MNFIRAQ's control over the video footage being shot breaks down, and danger intrudes in almost random and unexpected ways. Consider, for instance, the video clip entitled "Long Day in Baqubah, March 22, 2007", where a soldier engaged in combats with insurgents came extremely close to dying on camera: at one point during their rooftop skirmish (approximately 0:35 in the video), a tracer round is fired that misses a soldier's head by approximately a foot (cf. Figure 3.6; Figure 3.7)<sup>58</sup>. Aside from this one exception, violence, death, and conflict are carefully controlled and essentially, staged for the video camera. Having learned its lesson from Vietnam, the Pentagon is clearly keen to use the MNFIRAQ channel as a way of justifying Operation Iraqi Freedom by depicting the concrete, everyday successes of the so-called "good guys". Some videos, such as "Operation Exelen III, Feb. 25, 2007" contain macabre "score sheets", quantifying the number of terrorists killed, wounded, and detained in action, the number of local national hostages rescued<sup>59</sup>. Other video clips highlight the usefulness of the occupation



by depicting the heroic rescue of kidnap victims, the successful destruction of insurgent hideouts and weapons making facilities (both conventional and chemical), the discovery of important intelligence, the elimination of senior terrorist leaders, the opening of a local radio station and the destruction of land mines, to name only a few examples. Things, apparently, are getting done in Iraq: however, as Riverbend might point out, it is revealing that no footage was taken of electricity or running water being restored to the general Iraqi population.

MNFI might suggest that these video clips are meant to depict the “sticky materiality of practical encounters”, the fulfillment of “universal dreams and schemes” (freedom, democracy, liberty, etc.) on a concrete and local scale<sup>60</sup>. Focusing upon the second part of this claim (i.e., are these dreams actually fulfilled?), I think, misses the point. What is particularly interesting about these discursive representations of late modern warfare is precisely their “stickiness” with certain segments of the American population: how they are used as a vehicle to undermine all of the biases that characterize the liberal media’s (i.e., CNN) coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As alkorozim puts it:

“These videos are so important. All you get from the mainstream media is BS about how nothing is going right. God bless our troops, and God bless YouTube for *making a forum for reality!*”<sup>61</sup>.

If YouTube.com is the discursive space of reality, then television is the discursive space of the irrational, hate-filled, unpatriotic, and above all, depressing liberal media. Here, two examples will suffice:

“Thank you guys. You are our goodwill on the ground. Glad to see scenes our spews media would NEVER show us. They are afraid of what you guys are doing, just like the irrational hatefilled commenters...We support you guys! Thank you for your DAILY sacrifices. Stay until the job is done and come home with honor and victory!! Leave Iraq free from tyranny and secure for democracy”<sup>62</sup>.

“Have you ever turned on the TV? That's all the news shows. Iraqi's crying and dead insurgents/iraqis. Always another headline how a suicide bomber blew himself up in some Iraqi marketplace. This is just the other side of the story... sorta”<sup>63</sup>.

For these commentators, YouTube.com becomes a space of alternative political discourse that cuts through all of the bullshit in order to arrive at the “truth”, or at the very least, “the other side of the story...sorta”: in other words, a sort of “politics of truth”, to use Foucault’s terminology<sup>64</sup>.

But what kind of political discourse are we talking about here? Ostensibly, MNFIRAQ is keen to encourage a politics of democratic plurality. As she or he points out, “we approve almost every comment, critical or not, because of the healthy debate that they spawn”. The only comments that are “sure to be denied are those that include overt racism, personal threats, or whacked-out conspiracy theories that have nothing to do with the video under discussion”. Here, this particular field of articulation is necessarily meant to be driven by the logic of political struggle, in that YouTube, given its status as one of the most websites around the globe, is a medium that should theoretically facilitate the congregation of an ideologically diverse audience for the video clips of MNFIRAQ, which, when combined with the anonymity of the Internet, will spur the aforementioned “healthy debate”. From here, we might then situate YouTube within a broader plurality of new political spaces (such as blogs, newsgroups, television, etc.), through which contemporary logics of hegemony are worked out and articulated<sup>65</sup>. Although Laclau and Mouffe seek to unhinge the spatiality of the political from the territoriality of the nation-state, Sparke points out that, due to their insistence upon characterizing their project as an extension of Gramsci’s and thus, inheriting his epistemological baggage, theirs is a geography that is anemic, remaining trapped within the conceptual and spatial frameworks of their predecessors: for instance, when they discuss the challenges the left faces in radically democratizing contemporary societies, they note that such hegemonic struggle “will depend on the more or less democratic character of the forces which pursue that strategy, but also upon a set of structural limits established by other logics – *at the level of state apparatuses, the economy, and so on*”<sup>66</sup>. Similarly, despite its inherently global ambitions, MNFIRAQ not only assumes a certain prior geopolitical configuration of nation states, but also a very particular viewing subject that is inherently raced, and gendered.

First, what is particularly interesting about many of MNFIRAQ’s viewers is that they all seem to assume that other users are first and foremost, American. The following exchange between patriotmyass and TheMadKingII, contained in the comments section for the clip entitled “Soldiers Find Intel in Ramadi”, is fairly typical:

Patriotmyass: “Every family the American pigs murder = 200 freedom fighters.. americans call ordinary Iraqis "insurgents" to make their victims seem less human... Iraqis will fight the US illiterate brainwashed crack addicts until the US Nazi slave society decays and drops into the sewer, so the Iraqis can tell their grandchildren how they bravely stood up to the invaders.”

TheMadKingII: “You fucking traitor! I can't believe you're an American! I spent six years in uniform defending you? Go join the jihadis so we can put one in your fucking demented head where it belongs”<sup>67</sup>.

Similarly, users who dare to criticize Operation Iraqi Freedom are deemed to be not only unpatriotic, but also “pussies” and “cowards”, and by implication, “unmanly”:

“show some respect for the peeople whor over there protecting all of us, do i see any of u fuks who search the internet all day bagging soldiers going to iraq?? *no ur ppussys show respect...*”<sup>68</sup>.

Despite the difficulty (or even impossibility) of ascertaining a YouTube user's gender from written comments, certain gender roles are (re)performed on a consistent basis throughout the comment threads. There is, to paraphrase Hockenberry, the “jolly testosterone fuck-up”, who is usually hyper aggressive, avowedly heterosexual, violently racist, and extremely loud; there is the mother concerned for the safety of her sons completing a tour of duty in Iraq; there is the couch soldier, intimately familiar with the weaponry and the tactics of the United States army; there is the “liberal pussy”, a very broad term usually used to refer to anyone critical of the job that U.S. soldiers are doing in Iraq<sup>68</sup>. Within the “liberal pussy” category, one can further identify a large range of anti-war commentators. Some, such as srhanna, are simply tired of the belligerence and racism of other pro-war commentators:

“Nice racist crap. You sure make America look good huh?  
I'm an Arab and I'm a third generation U.S. Military veteran. Guess who else is Arabic: Frank Zappa, Cher, Paula Abdul, Sen George Mitchell, Casey Kasem. Do you want to kill them too? Maybe if you are looking for terrorists to kill you should look in the mirror. There are a lot of people in the world today saying the same thing you said about Americans and YOU are part of the problem”<sup>70</sup>.

Other, much more hardcore anti-imperialists such as nubiancerebra, would probably take offense at the label “liberal pussy”:

“As an anti-colonialist Black-American I \*OPENLY\* SUPPORT \*ARMED\* RESISTANCE for Palestinians, Iraqis & Lebanese against the U.S. & Israel. I'M \*SERIOUS\* ABOUT LIBERATION - BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY! That's the only way oppressed people will free themselves from Zionist/U.S./UK invaders. Those oppressors didn't go in nonviolently; their victims have no obligation to resist nonviolently. My “We Shall Overcome”, would be an RPG. Malcolm X: “I'm nonviolent with anyone who is nonviolent with me”<sup>71</sup>.

In some ways, reading through all of the comments posted to each of the video clips is like witnessing anonymous (and often darkly funny) caricatures of ordinary people reducing a complex political issue to a series of simplified and clichéd talking points and sound bytes. Although some commentators have very insightful things to say about Operation Iraqi Freedom and the War on Terror in general (such as srhanna above), most of the others generally resort to hyperbole and personal attacks in order to prove their points (i.e., by calling liberals “pussys”, and soldiers “fascist pigs”). I will return to this point shortly.

It is worth pointing out that any discussion of the Iraqi insurgency, either in the comments, or in the info blurbs for each video clip, is much less “nuanced” (for lack of a better term) overall than the back and forth debate concerning the War on Terror in general. Generally, one of two positions is articulated. First, more often than not, all Iraqis are characterized as “potential terrorists”: they are either already “suicidal” terrorists “fighting for their stupid religion” or they are going to become terrorists due to the spatialization of colonial modernity<sup>72</sup>. Second, and this position ties in with the first, the insurgents are either assumed to be foreigners recruited by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, or Iraqis who do not have the best interests of their own country at heart. It is, I think, significant that MNFIRAQ refers to the insurgents as *anti-Iraqi (and not anti-U.S.) forces*. They are clearly not true Iraqis because they do not want their country to be occupied by foreign soldiers. This is an argument that is often made in the comments section as well. Here, for example, is c6gunner, replying to the suggestion that new Iraqi armed forces seem to be capable of defending their own country:

“Regaurdless of what you think, you have to realize that "these guys" have asked the US to stay. The American soldiers say that the IP and ISF still need help, and the IP and ISF agree. In light of that, your opinion is next to worthless”<sup>73</sup>.

In order to demonstrates that this is a political position that is held not only by the members of the Iraqi armed forces, but also by the general population at large, MNFIRAQ posted a video clip showing Rafed Mahmood, the station manager of Diyala’s new “Independent Radio and Television Network”, praising U.S. soldiers for their hard work and dedication, and calling for a united, and stable Iraq. Similarly, MNFIRAQ also allowed irqusa79 to post this comment in the discussion section of the video clip entitled “500 lb bombs hit Al-Qaeda staging area”:

“Guys, thanks for killing those assholes! am an Iraqi man! would you guys in the MNF-I sell me an Apathe, so I can as much as

Wahabis I want to kill? if you do please let me know! if i dont have the whole money i will pay in installments to the US Gov.!”<sup>74</sup>.

There is no way of knowing if iraqus<sup>79</sup> is really an “Iraqi man” or not. I think, however, that the Pentagon and MNFI are trying to make iraqus<sup>79</sup> into the de-facto representative of the general Iraqi population. Real Iraqis, thus, do not support the foreign “insurgency”: they would rather plunge their country into debt buying weapons and assistance from the U.S. government in order to fan the flames of ethnosectarian violence and further prolong the conflict in Iraq. Real Iraqis also support and praise U.S. troops: they thank them every chance they get and shower them with gifts. Interestingly enough, Riverbend blogged about these so-called “real” or “true” Iraqis as well. Riverbend’s “true Iraqis” would echo Rafed Mahmood’s call for a united, stable Iraq. However, I am not so sure that they would praise U.S. soldiers for their hard work and dedication: rather, they would probably call them occupiers and ask them to get out of Iraq. Here, we can see how these struggles over the discursive mobilization of categories such as “true Iraqis” are intensely geographical; how identity politics in post-invasion Iraq are intricately wired to spatial transformation, to certain imaginings of what Iraq, as a nation-state, has been, is becoming, and ought to become.

In the end, what is the importance of YouTube as a space of discursive politics? On the one hand, it allows us to see how representations of late modern warfare are interpreted, analyzed, and in some cases, appropriated by their target audiences. We can begin to appreciate, I think, the ways in which we are all involved, in one way or another, in the production of the colonial modern, and thus, how we are all “complicit in what is done in our collective name”<sup>75</sup>. But it also seems to me that for all of the commenting, the posting, the discussing and the debating, one is left with the sense that nothing much was accomplished politically by the YouTube users. If the anonymity of the Internet gives people who might not do so otherwise to voice their political opinions in a public arena, it also makes them feel as though they have a licence to say whatever they want simply because *they can* say whatever they want without any real repercussions. In their comic “Green Blackboards (And Other Anomalies)”, *Penny Arcade* postulates the existence of a certain theoretical equation: Normal Person + Anonymity + Audience = Total Fuckwad<sup>76</sup>.

*Penny Arcade* is obviously joking, and yet, I think that their argument deserves closer consideration. What YouTube does, in effect, is give anyone with Internet access their own

personal soapbox. This may present opportunities to open lines of communication, to initiate dialogue, and to construct something new politically, but more often than not (and especially in the case of the MNFIRAQ channel), they remain under-utilized. Indeed, upon reading some of the comments made by users such as mayne06, one might be tempted to conclude that YouTube is in fact a virtual space of discursive *anti-politics*:

“People, stop battling out the causes and consequences of the war on youtube. Those that didn’t vote in the first place should actually plain and simply just shut up. If you want to protests, get up and go out into the streets, *you might get somewhere*”<sup>77</sup>.

Here, critics of the war are essentially being told to stop crying about the fact that it happened, to suck it up, and to move on. *Real politics* takes place in the streets or in the voting booth, and we can effect non-violent change no other way. This is a theme that is constantly reappearing, often in much more subtle ways, in the numerous comments left by channel users. For example, chali0777 argues:

“Why do so many people talk shit to the US Troops?? Cowards?? We have the best and bravest troops there is. At least they have the balls to stand up to their country and the world. *Call this war whatever you want, we are fighting bad guys either way. We helping the Iarqi people...and that is not a bad thing. God Bless everybody fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan*”<sup>78</sup>.

In other words, if the American war machine is already in Iraq under false pretenses, then the general population might as well make the most of it, and support the troops while they are at it, so that the troops come home sooner. However, what this argument ignores the fact that coalition forces should not have been unilaterally sent to Iraq in the first place, based upon the “evidence” presented by the Bush and Blair administrations. Perhaps it is too much to expect historically and geographically responsible discussions of the War on Terror on a website such as YouTube. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this is precisely how MNFI markets its channel: as a space of “healthy” debate, a space where the “clips are ours, but the conclusions are yours”. In this regard, the medium of the blog has shown a lot more promise not only in terms of its ability to foster critical thinking and nurture new political spaces online, but also in terms of empowering, as opposed to disempowering, large swathes of the general population.

*“If You Two Youths Had Even a Clue...”*

On December 9, 2007, YouTube user kriscaba posted a direct video response to the MNFIRAQ channel in general. In kriscaba’s video, war footage and comments taken directly from the MNFIRAQ channel are spliced together. The comments are read directly to the audience by two young teenage boys (presumably of high school age) and generally, they all highlight an obsession with patriotism, with guns, and with the military. A few examples shall suffice: “killing is fun”; “I love it when they die”; “I love that rifle, its so fucking sexy, the kick probably feels like an organism”; “damn the size of those guns gets me hard”, “this is the kind of defence we need at the U.S/Mexican border”; “god bless our troops, its great to see those haji fags getting blown to fucktown”; “I wonder how much it costs to waste that guy, but it was worth every penny”; “this is why I can’t wait to go into the army”; “wanna fight the enemy face to face? Goarmy.com” (a shameless plug by an army recruiter, promotube)<sup>79</sup>. By reading each comment one after another, pausing only to show footage from the MNFIRAQ channel, it is impossible to mistake the violence, the racism, the sexism, the phallic references to weaponry, the gay bashing and the general idolization of the military for anything else. I draw attention to kriscaba’s video because, although it does not have many views at all (789 in total, to be exact), I argue that it highlights YouTube’s *potential* as a virtual space of critical political dialogue. Kriscaba expresses an *argument*, not an opinion or a viewpoint; unlike exaggerated talking points (it is difficult to argue with a statement such as “if you don’t like this video, you are a pussy”), it is much easier to engage with his video and initiate dialogue based upon its contents. One exchange between kriscaba and another YouTube user, killsatan777 reinforces this point:

Killsatan777: “Maybe you should pay attention to what is happening instead of what people say about it?”

Kriscaba: “Thank you for your comment. I believe part of paying attention to the war is looking at the dialogue surrounding it. *These words reflect a belief system that is then acted upon perpetuating hate and violence*”<sup>80</sup>.

Here, killsatan777 offers a critique of the video clip, to which kriscaba responds in a direct, constructive, and positive manner. In contrast, MNFIRAQ does not respond to any criticism at all: “dumb comments” are allowed to be posted in order to encourage “healthy debate”, and yet MNFIRAQ ignores them completely. No counter-arguments are made to prove that the 45 video clips are actually authentic; no defense of the former Bush administration’s decision to invade

Iraq is offered; there is even no response when U.S. soldiers are called idiots and incompetents by random YouTube users who may or may not know any better. The very fact that kriscaba's clip was probably produced by teenagers makes it all the more inspiring.

Where do we go from here? What is really unique about MNFIRAQ's YouTube channel is that it gives us the opportunity to see how representations of warfare are received, interpreted, digested, and dissimulated by their target audience. In my discussion of blogs, I suggested that one of the defining features of the blogging experience was its interactivity (being able to e-mail questions to the blogger, being able to comment on his or her posts, etc.). Unfortunately, on both Riverbend's and Colby Buzzel's blogs, all of the comments had pretty much been scrubbed by the time I accessed their websites and as such, I was not able to see how their readership responded to their blogging. Unless they have been backed up on an archive somewhere, these comments have been pretty much lost forever. While reading both *Baghdad Burning* and *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, I always felt that I was missing out on something, that I was essentially only reading *half* of the blog. Despite the absolute absurdity of some of the comments posted in response to MNFIRAQ's video clips, they are interesting, and even engrossing, because, I think, at the end of the day, it is impossible to ignore the fact that somewhere, there is a person sitting in front of a computer screen typing out a more or less honest response to something that she or he has seen on the Internet. In her attempt to trace the outlines of what feminist objectivity might look like, Haraway writes:

“Rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement: to be from everywhere and so nowhere, *to be free from interpretation, from being represented*...rational knowledge is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders...rational knowledge is a power-sensitive conversation”<sup>81</sup>.

And so, I cannot dismiss MNFIRAQ channel as pure propaganda, even though ultimately, Haraway's processes of “ongoing critical interpretation” are often interrupted before they can begin to fully mature. I can, however, tentatively hold up kriscaba's video as an indicator of YouTube's potential; its possible future as a critical space of discursive politics.



***“Only the Dead Are Safe...”***

“Israel didn’t let in the foreign journalists because they didn’t want to the world to see a massacre”<sup>1</sup>.

“When you have hundreds of journalists coming in, most haven’t the faintest idea about the war or the situation...take the UN school [where 42 people were killed by an Israeli shell] for example. There’s a lot of questions as to what actually happened. If the foreign media had been there it would have had much more of an impact on the conflict than it has at the moment. For the first time, when Israel raised questions, journalists had to address these issues and not get caught in feeding frenzy of reporting the story”<sup>2</sup>.

Where do we go from here? One might suggest that, given my focus upon Operation Iraqi Freedom, that the broader applicability of this thesis is rather limited. The conflict in Iraq is ostensibly winding down. As President Obama put it so succinctly in a speech that he gave to approximately 8000 Marines at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina: “Let me say this as plainly as I can...by August 21, 2010, our combat mission in Iraq will end...as we carry out this drawdown, my highest priority will be the safety and security of our troops and civilians in Iraq”<sup>3</sup>. Of the 142,000 troops currently stationed in Iraq, between 92,000 and 107,000 are slated to leave by August of next year. According to MacAskill, “this mission at that point will change from combat to one that deals primarily with training Iraqi forces, supporting the Iraqi government, and engaging in counter-terrorism”<sup>4</sup>. For Obama, fulfilling his campaign promises means settling for a “less than perfect” Iraq:

“We cannot rid Iraq of all who oppose America, or sympathize with our adversaries. We cannot police Iraq’s streets until they are completely safe, nor stay until Iraq’s union is perfected. We cannot sustain indefinitely a commitment that has put a strain on our military, and will cost the American people nearly trillions of dollars. America’s men and women in uniform have fought block by block, province by province, year after year, to give the Iraqis this chance to choose a better future. Now, we must ask the Iraqi people to seize it”<sup>5</sup>.

The contrasts between President Obama’s carefully chosen rhetoric and then President Bush’s bombastic “Mission Accomplished” speech could not be starker: short-sighted, misguided confidence has now been replaced with what might essentially be interpreted as a tacit admission of failure (although the Obama administration’s decision to keep a small number of highly

trained forces in Iraq long after the major troop withdrawals suggests that the problem was not necessarily the war itself, but the tactics used to fight it). One might argue that the U.S. is once again passing the buck. American soldiers did not fight to make Iraq a free, progressive, and stable democracy: rather, they fought to give Iraqis a *chance to prove themselves*. On the other hand, some Iraqis, including Riverbend, have been asking the U.S. to pack up their tanks, their missiles, their rapists, and their torturers since the beginning of 2004 and to leave Iraq alone: a “perfect” Iraq, then, is one that has been emptied of U.S. troops.

Despite these, or perhaps because of these, processes, the Iraqi blogosphere remains incredibly active. Although Salam Pax stopped updating his first blog, *Where is Raed?*, in April of 2004, he began a second blog, *Salam Pax, the Baghdad Blogger*, shortly afterwards, and currently even maintains a Twitter account. And although nobody has heard from Riverbend since October of 2007, young Iraqi women continue to blog about their experiences of living in a war zone. One of the most interested is entitled *A Star From Mosul: Living in War*, which is being updated by a young woman who calls herself “Najma”. According to a blog post that she posted on July 17, 2004, she was born in Baghdad on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1988, lives with her family in the city of Mosul, currently studies Communication Engineering at the University of Mosul, has achieved the highest marks in her first two years of study, and was encouraged to start blogging by her uncle on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Interestingly enough, not only did she marry a blogger, she belongs to a whole family of bloggers: her dad, Truth Teller; her aunt, Rose; her sister HNK; her cousin Raghda; her other cousin Hassan; her mother, Mama; and some of her other relatives, Dalia and Sunshine (the precise nature of their relationship is left ambiguous)<sup>6</sup>. In many respects, *A Star From Mosul* is the blog of a young, keen college student: Najma meets up with her friends, she studies for finals, stresses about her marks, takes pictures of her surroundings, etc. War, however, always finds a way to slip in through the back door. The strict curfew, for instance, makes it difficult for anyone to go anywhere in Mosul: some families get stuck in the wrong parts of the city, and must walk home<sup>7</sup>. The occupation has also made being a young Iraqi college student very dangerous, in more ways than one. In a post that she uploaded on February 5, 2008, entitled “Dead Zone”, she tells her readership that “very little is going right and the situation in Mosul is going from *really bad to much worse*”:

“During the exams period, and in the course of one week, two professors in the university were killed in their way back from their colleges. One was killed in front of his children as they were

with him in the car, and the other in front of his son who also got a bullet from the attack but survived it”<sup>8</sup>.

Unfortunately for Najma, the situation in Mosul was only going to get worse. On May 15, 2008, she posted an entry entitled “Freedom: Undefined Word – try again in few years”, where she highlights the extent to which Iraqi women are doubly affected by the ratcheting up of violence in the streets of Mosul:

“The curfew that started at 9 PM last Friday was only temporarily stopped at 6 AM today and is going to start again at 6 PM until further notice. Yesterday upon hearing the news I couldn't believe I was going to college again.. but little by little I discovered that none of the female students is going to college and so I reluctantly decided not to go either”<sup>9</sup>.

The “news” that Najma is referring to in this post can only be the transformation of Mosul into a “ghost city” under siege by American and Iraqi troops, who launched an attack “aimed at crushing the last bastion of al-Qaeda in Iraq”<sup>10</sup>. According to Cockburn, Mosul has not only been sealed off from the outside world by a carceral network of police and army checkpoints, but the city has been placed under a state of “temporary” lockdown by the enforcement of a strict curfew. Apparently, “soldiers shoot at any civilian vehicle on the streets in defiance of [this] strict curfew”: “two men, a woman, and a child in one car which failed to stop were shot dead [Sunday] by US troops, who issued a statement saying the men were armed and one made ‘threatening movements’”<sup>11</sup>. Partitioned by networks of barricades and blast walls, Mosul, like Baghdad, has become a counter-city, ravaged by the prosecution of a biopolitical agenda<sup>12</sup>. Not only has life in Mosul been assiduously measured, analyzed, controlled, and accounted for in this latest offensive, US soldiers fight Al-Qaeda and the so-called insurgents as though they were battling cancer, or a flesh eating bacteria: isolate the diseased area, seal it off, violently excise it from the body politic of Iraq via a process of chemotherapy that harms the good cells in addition to the bad ones, and monitor the situation in order to prevent recurrence.

How does one live in this kind of an urban environment? Despite herself, Najma finds it difficult to love Mosul in the same way that Riverbend loves Baghdad:

“Hatred, such a strong unhealthy feeling...but I just can't help but hate it here...I hate it, I hate it, I HATE IT...I want to shout it at the top of my lungs so everybody can know that *I just can't stand it here*”<sup>13</sup>.

And yet, somehow, life goes on. Her sister, HNK, recently published a book entitled *IraqiGirl: Diary of a Teenage Girl in Iraq*, while on April 3, 2009, Najma celebrated her two week engagement anniversary with her husband and fellow blogger, Bookish. As she puts it:

“The single most beautiful thing in life must be to love someone who loves you back...it changes everything; the world is suddenly pink, you feel happier and safer than ever, and want to live every moment forever...I don’t want to bother you with the details of how it all happened...all you really need to know is that *I’ve finally found the bright side of my life in Iraq*, and that I’ve never felt luckier...Everything feels different now...*I am different...this is the beginning of the rest, and the best, of my life*”<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the killing, the bombing, the curfews, the patrols, the raids, the torture, and the occupation, Iraqis are still hopeful that there is something to look forward to in the future; that someday, things will go back to (or be even better than) the way that things were before the invasion, and perhaps even before Saddam. Furthermore, as Riverbend’s final blog post demonstrates, this is not a sentiment that remains anchored to the physical, material geographies of Iraq. Rather, it taps into a broader geographical imagination, a powerful discursive conceptualization of what Iraq means to ex-patriate Iraqis, particularly those such as Riverbend who have been forced to go into a self-imposed exile abroad.

Furthermore, the latest conflict in Gaza and the West Bank demonstrates the extent to which blogging has become a crucial element of contemporary news reporting, particularly in the world’s conflict zones. The latest assault on the West Bank, which began in earnest on December 27, 2008, has become particularly infamous for Israel’s decision to ban foreign journalists from the Gaza strip on the pretext of “security”. According to McGreal, “foreign journalists have been forced to report without getting to the detail of what is going on”, which meant, “at least in the early days of the bombardment, that reporters who would have been in Gaza were instead reporting from Israeli towns and cities under fire from Hamas, and Israeli officials found it easier to get themselves in front of a television camera”<sup>15</sup>. As a result, foreign news agencies such as CNN, BBC, CNN, and CBC, to name only a few, found themselves searching for a way to circumvent the Israel’s “security precautions” and bypass the IDF’s efforts to “hermetically seal” the Gaza Strip away from the world. By searching the Internet, they came across Sameh Habeeb’s blog, *Gaza Strip, the Untold Story*. According to Gilinsky, Habeeb had just completed an undergraduate degree in English Literature at the Islamic

University in Gaza when he began blogging in order to show the world what it is like for “Palestinians living under siege”:

“Each day, he provided daily feeds with statistics that were relied upon by the mainstream media. The grim numbers were trusted by many of the mainstream news outlets. He operated just like a regular journalist would. His become became a very busy one-man international news bureau...He regularly checked in with contacts in human rights organizations. He tapped into an organically fused network of local Palestinian journalists, each one passing on data to the next. At night, when the reporters of Al-Jazeera slept, he was their stand-by reporter should anything happen”<sup>16</sup>.

Habeeb was not alone in his efforts, in that a whole slew of bloggers operating inside of the Gaza Strip began to provide updates on a much more regular basis. Arabic blogger *Exiled*, for instance, describes the overwhelming sensation of fear that he felt when coming “within sight of death”:

“Only the dead are safe in Gaza. I left my flat and my wife and I went to the family home, but not searching for a safe place from the bombing. I want to be next to my mother in such circumstances. I am not a hero: like my young nephew, I am trembling from the explosive metal sound in the air nearby. But I hold back my trembling in embarrassment. *I am not a hero*”<sup>17</sup>.

Human rights activists working in the Gaza strip at the time of the attacks, such as Canadian Eva Bartlett, often blogged in solidarity with Palestinians. In addition to describing the gruesome consequences of “Operation Cast Lead”, Bartlett’s blog, *In Gaza*, contains many pictures of a Gaza Strip further wracked by the horrors of late modern warfare. More often than not, they depict bombed out urban landscapes, injured or dead civilians, missile craters in the middle of residential neighbourhoods, crushed ambulances lost in the line of duty, hospital emergency crowded to the breaking point, destroyed civilian infrastructure, and on some occasions, the weapons of war themselves (flechette bombs, etc.). Bartlett’s photos of hospital waiting rooms are particularly revealing. Despite Israel’s claims to the contrary, they suggest at the very least that proper care is *not* being taken to ensure that Palestinian citizens are not caught in the crossfire between the Israeli Defence Force and Hamas. Some observers have suggested that these photos highlight the deliberate and systematic violation of human rights in the Gaza Strip by the IDF, and it seems to me that these are perfectly reasonable claims to make based on the evidence that has been presented, particularly when they are situated within the broader historical

geographies of the conflict<sup>18</sup>. Even the United Nations personnel investigating the infamous assault on the Fakhura girl's elementary school have accused the IDF of deliberately targeting civilians: as Chris Gunness, a spokesperson for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency put it so succinctly, "we're 99.9% sure that no militants were at the school"<sup>19</sup>.

Eventually, Israel decided to remove the mobility on foreign reporters in the Gaza Strip. According to Lefkovits, the "decision to lift the blanket ban on press entry came a day after the last IDF soldiers who took part in the ground operation against Hamas in Gaza left the area, and follows a two-and-a-half-month-long dispute over the restrictions with the foreign press based in Israel"<sup>20</sup>. Despite the very real possibility that the conflict between Hamas and Israel will escalate once again, Sameh Habeeb is currently much less busy, as demonstrated by the decreasing intensity and frequency of his blog posts. Nevertheless, I raise this example because I think that it underscores the continued importance of thinking critically about the tight relationship between representational practices, space, and late modern warfare. If we believe Foucault, who, in his recently published lectures, came to emphasize the ways in which war has expanded to infiltrate the entire social field, then it rapidly becomes clear that these late modern geographical struggles cannot be analyzed in isolation from each other<sup>21</sup>. In this thesis, I necessarily confined myself to analysis of Operation Iraqi Freedom given both my time and space limitations. By juxtaposing the different representations of Operation Iraqi Freedom with the different representations of Operation Cast Lead, we can begin to see how, given the increasing importance of the so-called "social media", the nature of late modern warfare as we know it is subtly being reconfigured in a myriad of different ways<sup>21</sup>. As Gilinsky puts it:

"Both sides [of the Hamas-Israel conflict] deployed dangerous new media weapons during this latest round of fighting in Gaza. Armed with Facebook profiles, Twitter accounts, and Lavazza espressos, warriors fearlessly and tirelessly scoured the cyber battlefield searching for enemy (blog) outposts. Outfitted with high-tech ammunition like HD videocameras, firewire 800s, and white phosphorescent keyboards, they attacked one-sided videos, slanted essays, and enemy propaganda with propaganda of their own...in 22 days of combat in Gaza, these were the young fighters tasked with winning the merciless war of public opinion for their side"<sup>23</sup>.

When I started researching this thesis, nobody would have thought that Facebook could be used by global war machines as a tool of propaganda, and Twitter had barely come into existence. Future conflicts (and there *will* be future conflicts) will only be more technologically driven,

more media savvy, and more innovative in terms of the judicious deployment of propaganda. It is thus time for critical human geography to not only take the connections between these representational practices, space, and late modern warfare seriously but also to remember that our “established order of things...is validated by its own regimes of truth and it produces acutely real, visibly material consequences”<sup>24</sup>. Imagined geographies do not only provide justification for late modern warfare, they also infiltrate its entire structure. They dictate how a war machine moves across space.

In the end of *Geographical Imaginations*, Gregory argues that “the task of a critical human geography – of a geographical imaginations – is, I suggest, to unfold [the transcendental and omniscient vision of the angels] and replace it with another: one that recognizes the corporeality of vision and reaches out, from one body to another, not in a mood of arrogance, aggression, and conquest, but in a spirit of humility, understanding, and care”<sup>25</sup>. If we, as critical human geographers, strive to produce a genuinely human geography, “to *make* a difference – politically and intellectually - by being attentive *to* difference”, we must learn to think about space, the body, and representational practices in very different ways<sup>26</sup>. Bloggers of particular ideological persuasions and political leanings can, and often do, say the most offensive things: a quick trip to the socially progressive blog *pandagon* will bring one up to speed with the worst of them<sup>27</sup>. Blogs such as *Baghdad Burning*, *My War*, *A Star from Mosul*, *In Gaza*, and *From Gaza: Suffering Like Gazans* however, highlight the possibility of constructing such a critical and human geographical imagination. To conclude this thesis, I quote Barbara L, a reader of *From Gaza*, who commented on a post that Habeeb uploaded entitled “Palestinian father mourns son killed in Gaza 28 Jan 09”:

“Salam ailikum...

To yet another human who has lost part of his soul, one of so many when there should be none, I send my condolences, my prayers, and hopes that he can save the rest of his family from the beasts that do such horrific things to the innocent.

His spirit is so beautiful. This is what a true Muslim man is, not the image held up by the Western media. A deeply intelligent man who faces these horrors with dignity and the knowledge that all will be well if one lives according to the beliefs of Islam as a source of strength as it was originally intended to do.

As always, Sameh, your work touches my soul. Thank you”<sup>28</sup>.

## Notes

### *A Prince's Geography*

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- 4 Sparke, Matthew. *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation State*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) xv.
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- 7 Johnston, Ronald John. "Human Geography". In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Eds. Ronald John Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, Michael Watts. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000) 353.
- 8 Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *Le Petit Prince*. (Florida: Harcourt, 2001) 45. Translation: Translation: A geographer is a scholar who knows the location of the oceans, the rivers, the cities, the mountains, and the deserts.
- 9 Saint-Exupéry 45. Translation: Translation: "Exactly! But I am not an explorer. I have no explorers on my planet. It is not the geographer's task to count the cities, the rivers, the mountains, the oceans, and the deserts. The geographer is far too important to waste his time browsing around. He never leaves his office. But he receives explorers. He questions them and notes down what they recall of their travels. And if the recollections of one of them seem interesting to him, the geographer orders an inquiry into the explorer's moral character".
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  - 30 Davis, Mike. "War-mart 'Revolution' in warfare slouches toward Baghdad: It's all in the network". *SFGATE*. Last Updated: 9 March 2003. URL: < <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/03/09/IN8529.DTL>>; When Davis talks about a "synchronized distributed network with real-time transactional awareness", he essentially means that Walmart cashiers are hooked into a network that allows them to transmit sales data to suppliers, and thus, inventory is managed through "horizontal" networks, as opposed to traditional top down hierarchies of command. .
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"Every Iraqi's Nightmare"

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- 16 In this chapter, I will be exclusively referencing the blog for a couple of reasons. Although the comments have disappeared from *Baghdad Burning* and despite the fact that the publishers of the book tried to replicate Riverbend's links as best they could, it still remains very linear, and thus, lacks the interactive feel of the blog. As a reader, you are not encouraged to explore Riverbend's material at your own discretion, and hence, it becomes much more difficult to tease out interesting connections and relationships. Second, it is much easier to work with the blog format: you can search it, index it, download it as a .pdf, etc.

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- 48 Buzard, James. "On Auto-Ethnographic Authority". *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 16.1 (2003): 61-91; Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority". *Representations*. 2 (1983): 118-146; Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992. In his essay on "Ethnographic Authority", James Clifford (1983) argues that the frontpiece for Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* signals the predominant mode of modern fieldwork authority: "You are there, because I was there" (118). Buzard's (2003) essay "On Auto-ethnographic Authority", where an auto-ethnography is understood to be "the study, representation, or knowledge of a culture by one or more of its members", explores many of the same themes and issues (61).
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### *Colby Buzzell's War*

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blogs “by country”. Nevertheless, I am much more concerned with the overall numbers than with the specifics here.

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- 8 This was the title of the TIME magazine article that inspired Buzzell to begin blogging.
- 9 Buzzell 2005 108.
- 10 He signs each of his posts with CBFTW, which essentially stands for Colby Buzzell Fuck the World. When asked by a superior officer what the FTW in his signature stands for, Buzzell lies and says “For the War”. The officer then asks what FTW stands for if someone of lower rank asks, to which Buzzell replies “Fuck the War”.
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- 12 Buzzell 2005 112.
- 13 Buzzell 2005 40-42.
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- 15 Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 37.
- 16 Pura 2007 4. One example will suffice. A quick Google search of “Iraqis are fags” reveals this blatant homophobia on the blog entitled “Razzputin, Argue With Everyone”: “the faggot Iraqis have proven what we have known all along. Fags don’t value life. Fags value asshole. Even though there is the Iraqi death penalty for practicing faggotry, these stupid disgusting ass-monkeys would sooner butt-fuk than preserve human life...for these reasons, *we have to keep faggots under control in our own country, and we have to keep them away from children*”. I also believe that “The Exiled” blog also satirized the right wing’s obsession with the “Iraqis-as-fags” trope in a piece that they wrote entitled “Freaky Iraqis”: “Bla-bla-bla. So what we learn is that the Iraqis *are a bunch of fags who can’t deal with a couple of beheadings*”.
- 17 Desultory Girl. “I Don’t Want To Live Alone (Comments)”. *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*. 29 July, 2004. URL: < <http://cbftw.blogspot.com/2004/07/i-dont-want-to-live-alone.html#comments>>; sarah. “I Don’t Want To Live Alone (Comments)”; betsy. “I Don’t Want To Live Alone (Comments)”.
- 18 Ron Brynaert. “I Don’t Want To Live Alone (Comments)”.
- 19 Stykeraunt. “I Don’t Want To Live Alone (Comments)”.
- 20 cf. Buzzell 2005 218-220 for an example.
- 21 Buzzell 2005 200-212, 260, 263.
- 22 Buzzell 2005 263.
- 23 Buzzell 2005 265.
- 24 Buzzell 2005 162, emphasis mine.



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- 31 Buzzell 2005 302.
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- 33 Butler 2009 71.
- 34 Buzzell 2005 303.
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- 36 Butler 2009 100.
- 37 Kaplan 2006.
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- 39 Buzzell 2005 120.
- 40 Buzzell 2005 62.
- 41 Buzzell 2005 63. The list of qualification is actually quite long and detailed: a) Do not engage anyone who has surrendered or is out of battle due to sickness wounds. b) do not target or strike any of the following except in self-defense to protect yourself, your unit, friendly forces, and designated persons or property under your control: civilians, hospitals, mosques, churches, shrines, schools, museums, national monuments, and other historical and cultural sites. c) do not fire into civilian populated areas or buildings unless the enemy is using them for military purposes, or if necessary for your self defense. Minimize collateral damage. d) Do not target enemy infrastructure, lines of communication, or economic objects unless necessary for self defense or if ordered by your commander (61-2).
- 42 Buzzell 2005 100.
- 43 Buzzell 2005 61.
- 44 Buzzell 2005 193.
- 45 Buzzell 2005 192.
- 46 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999).
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- 51 Buzzell 2005 153-154.
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- 53 Riverbend. *Baghdad Burning*. URL: < <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>>.
- 54 Mitchell 1991 33.
- 55 Buzzell 2005 155.
- 56 Buzzell 2005 156.
- 57 Buzzell 2005 193.
- 58 Buzzell 2005 251.
- 59 Buzzell 2005 193.
- 60 Buzzell 2005 256.

- 61 Buzzell 2005 253.
- 62 Buzzell 2005 263. Green Berets were Navy SEALs operating in Vietnam.
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- 65 Buzzell 2005 321. A Field Grade Article 15 is a form of military discipline authorized by Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, requiring no court-martial.
- 66 Buzzell 2008.
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- 68 Cresswell, Tim. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
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*"Because Total Destruction is Beautiful"*

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- 4 Duffy, Michael. "The Surge At Year One". *Time.com*. Last Updated: 31 January, 2008. URL: < <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708843,00.html>>.
- 5 Kagan, Kimberly. "Enforcing the Law: The Baghdad Security Plan Begins". *The Institute for the Study of War*. Last Updated: 15 March, 2007. URL: < <http://www.understandingwar.org/files/reports/IraqReport02.pdf>>.
- 6 MNC-I. "MNC-I Conducts Operation Phantom Thunder". *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Last Updated: 19 June, 2007. URL: < [http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=12431&Itemid=128](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12431&Itemid=128)>.
- 7 McFate, Montgomery. "Anthropology and counterinsurgency: the strange story of their curious relationship". *Military Review*. (March-April 2005): 1.
- 8 McFate 2005 1.
- 9 Shachtman, Noah. "Army Squeezes Soldiers Blogs, Maybe to Death". *Wired*. Last Updated: 2 May, 2007. URL: < [http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/05/army\\_bloggers](http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/05/army_bloggers)>.
- 10 MNC-I. "Memorandum for Distribution: MNC-I Policy #9 – Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites". *MNF-I*. Last Updated: 6 April, 2005. URL: < [http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/For\\_The\\_Troops/bloggers\\_policy.pdf](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/For_The_Troops/bloggers_policy.pdf)>. MNF-I is responsible for overall strategy in Iraq, while MNC-I is responsible for day to day tactics.
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- 12 Shachtman 2007.
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- 14 Christensen 2008; Anden-Padopoulos, Kari. "US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube". *Popular Communication*. 7.1 (2009): 17-27.
- 15 Mouffe 2005; Here, it is worth noting that the Pentagon is in fact probably specifically targeting young people in America, as they are undoubtedly disproportionately represented among YouTube and Internet users. Thus, one might even argue that the military is keen to win over the hearts and minds of U.S. youth in order to maintain a pool of potential recruits.
- 16 Christensen 2008.
- 17 NickRoller. "Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq (Comments)". *Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq*. 10 March, 2007. URL: <  
[http://www.youtube.com/comment\\_servlet?all\\_comments&v=nINORX006-c&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DnINORX006-c%26feature%3Dchannel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=nINORX006-c&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DnINORX006-c%26feature%3Dchannel_page)>.
- 18 FrettiYetti. "Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq (Comments)".
- 19 Ottaway, David B. and Vobedja, Barbara. "0.5-Caliber Rifle for Snipers Finds Itself Under Assault". *The Seattle Times*. Last Updated: 5 September, 1999. URL: <  
<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19990905&slug=2981276>>.
- 20 tubub. "Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq (Comments)".
- 21 DARKJOSE06. "Kidnap Rescue (Comments)". *Kidnap Rescue*. 9 February, 2008. URL: <  
[http://www.youtube.com/comment\\_servlet?all\\_comments&v=pXg2pt4hFiY&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DpXg2pt4hFiY%26feature%3Dchannel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=pXg2pt4hFiY&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DpXg2pt4hFiY%26feature%3Dchannel_page)>.
- 22 RamzGT. "Rounding Up Insurgents, March 2007 (Comments)". *Rounding Up Insurgents, March 2007*. 1 April, 2007. URL: <  
[http://www.youtube.com/comment\\_servlet?all\\_comments&v=b1XQqOXd8Gc&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3Db1XQqOXd8Gc%26feature%3Dchannel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=b1XQqOXd8Gc&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3Db1XQqOXd8Gc%26feature%3Dchannel_page)>, emphasis mine.
- 23 Der Derian 2009; Gregory 2004; Carlson, Timothy and Katovsky, Bill. *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq*. (United States of America: The Lyons Press, 2003); Pollard, Tom. "The Hollywood War Machine". 24.1 (2002): 121-139.
- 24 Mitchell 2000.
- 25 The clips themselves were probably edited in Windows Movie Maker or iMovie using its default text font.
- 26 thundercow99. "Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children (Comments)". *Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children*. 30 March, 2007. URL: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQZITsqp3-I&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQZITsqp3-I&feature=channel_page)>.
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