Witnessing the Iraq Invasion: A Reading of the Rhetoric of Anger and the Form of the Blog in Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning*

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Abstract

The following paper examines the way in which the rhetoric of anger is constructed within the form of the blog post. By reading Riverbend's 'Baghdad Burning' where the immediacy of anger is represented through the written word, the analysis aims to deviate from common perception that views anger as a reaction rather than being the avenue for nuanced critique. It argues, instead, that the careful presentation of resentment amidst depictions of everyday life during the invasion of Iraq provides one with a powerful and relevant vocabulary with which to confront the imperial tendencies of Anglophonic political powers and define the many traumatising contours of American messianic impulses.

Keywords: Anger; Blog; Iraq War; Rhetoric.

Over the last few decades the subject of religious conflict and cultural trauma has garnered widespread attention. Within the divisions of humanities, medicine and industries of humanitarian aid, the duration and afterlife of contemporary instances of international war have inspired several insightful projects. While differing in particulars, what binds these works together is often the focus on an Anglo-American vocabulary of representing violence, memory and trauma. As John Berger's observations on the post 9/11 cultural industry demonstrates, representations of the American experiences of contemporary wars seem to hold a disproportionately greater weight in terms of authority, impact and sheer number. Their presence in the dominant cultural imaginary have allowed the idea of the occurrence of violent events and their retrospective retelling to enter into the public discourse as the prevalent condition of contemporary life. Furthermore, this everyday ordinariness of national trauma has drawn into it the celebrated concept that to the Anglo-American world alone belongs the right to articulate violence, understand its implications and seek redemption through closure.

Contemporary instances of trauma, including but not limited to the wars in Iraq, those in Afghanistan and the various conflicts in the Middle East,

have, consequently, become less about the reality of those who live in these climates and more about the metaphors that they invoke in the Anglo-American collective imaginary. This paper attempts to study one example of these complex politics by looking at the blog *Baghdad Burning* by Riverbend. It will locate the blog within the larger corpus of web publications and look primarily at the connections between the rhetoric of anger as it is used it the text and conversations on the ethical dimensions of international wars.

The advent of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 saw, among numerous news reports and op-ed pieces, the rise of two blogs that gathered, over the course of the war, a great deal of curiosity, interest and popularity. These were Salam Pax' blog titled "Where is Raed?" and Riverbend's "Baghdad Burning." Both texts were eyewitness accounts of the invasion as it unfolded and took on the role of being critical insiders to the American military intervention in the state of Iraq. As a result of their stated purpose, the texts incited a global response that was as divisive as it was diverse. Readers and the larger reading public had been brought into a reality that they had seemingly never considered, that the Iraqis could read and write in an English that was nuanced and infused with references to histories of international and religious warfare. Their words questioned the ethics of war, rather than being a mere diatribe against a foreign invasion and brought forth the issue of critically understanding the political use and nature of violence, fear and witnesses. Their works generated an idea of Iraq that provided a sharp break from the imagined and therefore convenient myth that this was a nation paralysed by medieval practices of the Islamic faith, on the one hand, and a repressive politics of dictatorship, on the other.[2] In the blog *Baghdad Burning*, one of the ways in which this rupture was introduced and delineated included a careful utilisation of the rhetoric and ethical frames of anger.

Insofar as it is an affective state, enveloping emotions, feelings and moods, the quality of anger is such that it is often prone to being contained, disregarded and dismissed. Although differing in context, Andrew Stauffer's essay on Byron's poetry and its representation of anger provides a sound and thorough historical perspective on how the emotion gathered contradictory ethical valences. From being classified as disruptive by the likes of Wordsworth to being viewed as a parameter for the demand for justice by Burke, the responses to cultural representations of the emotion have been as transient as the state itself. Anger is variously an emotion, a feeling and a mood, thereby becoming a subject that resists a seamless entry into stable cultural vocabularies of emotional states.[3] Unlike justice, it is not always associated with the demands for equality and liberty and like most

subjective expressions, is often relegated to the realms of the irrational. The consequent implication then is that the state offers little in terms of effective criticism and analytical insight. Therefore, although each emotional and connative stage of anger demands its own framework both in terms of performance and academic study, as Stauffer points out, the overarching connotations attached to the state tend to reduce it to an entity that is too volatile to be taken into rational account. However, it is the complexity of the affective state itself that defines its significance in political rhetoric. That is to say, the differences between the emotion and the feeling or the feeling and the mood are what lend to the state of anger its diversity and consequently, its malleability and efficacy. It is this understanding that is exemplified in the tone of Riverbend's writings:

Nearly four years ago, I cringed every time I heard about the death of an American soldier. They were occupiers, but they were humans also... Had I not chronicled those feelings of agitation in this very blog, I wouldn't believe them now. Today, they simply represent numbers.

The surfaces formed around the varying shades of anger are clear. Agitation, as River terms it, is expressed simultaneously as an overwhelming rage or a continual hatred interspersed with "compassion and civility."[4] Amidst the long arc of the political and private use and representations of anger, River locates *Baghdad Burning.*

In her last post on the blog, Riverbend observes that the "fall of Baghdad" was an event that altered the lives of millions. She draws the reader into a world that is "destitute" despite being rich in mineral oil, ravaged in a manner that warrants the need for lives to be "salvaged" and "scraped" off the streets and into a world that seems to be premised on the pervasive condition of a paranoia. This precarious condition of living is highlighted through her use of the tense in the final, and for those who read her blog for the first time retroactively the introductory, blog post. While writing about the event of the Invasion and its aftermaths, River says "we are learning" and in so doing begins to secure a collective around the many Iraqi experiences of the war. The phrase generates the image of a collective journey towards discovering a new political system while remaining under the shadow of an erstwhile dictatorial power and navigating the interruptions caused by a foreign political philosophy. The plural 'we' that is invoked in conjunction with a criticism of the state of political rivalry in Iraq, sectarianism and of the American propaganda of global peace and the eradication of terror allows her to draw distinct binaries between those who have suffered and those who have inflicted varying shades of that suffering. This binary is, in the first instance, problematic since it recalls Michael Spindler's observations of war as a cataclysmic event that acts upon the

passive subject, thereby absolving the subject of a sense of responsibility or participation. However, invoked in the specific circumstance of the invasion of Iraq, this duality that hearkens back to the same model circulated within the dominant American narrative, plays the role of an expository segment that then takes the reader further into a realm where these oppositions are called into question and critical analysis. Thus, when River punctuates the 'are learning' with the phrase "we have learned," she is building a complex universe where the process of attaining political stability necessitates the rhetorical invocation of the hegemonic doctrines of racial and ethnic binaries along with a subsequent and systematic questioning of them.[5] In this regard and, as we will see, in the use of anger, her vocabulary acts as a testimony to the flux of her reality, an act that is mirrored by the form of web publications.

Form and content coalesce in the text as the technical structures of electronic international networks support the transmission and creation of a consistent and continual anger. The placement of rhetorical questions, for instance, that demands answers from those in legislative assemblies and bureaucratic committees in among images of bloody Iraqi streets, destroyed buildings and an oppressive, acerbic heat, creates a rhythm where violence and associated fear is tempered by the angry demand for justice. The world of River's blog mimics the landscape of Iraq and the two together form a symbiosis that complicates the established historical trajectory associated with expressions and uses of violence and rage. The former is reduced to the status of the ordinary whereas the latter enacts the role that has historically been imagined as belonging to the measured man, intent on providing real political change without subjecting himself to the vicissitudes and diversions of public outcries. *Baghdad Burning* resists these easy categorisations by subverting long established social roles and in so doing provides the first example of destabilising the Anglo-American narratives that interpret an imagined Iraq.

This to and fro movement of the prose, lent structure by the form of the blog and reinforced by the historically corroborated pace of war performs yet another important function. It introduces into the reading sphere questions of veracity, authorship and the value of eyewitness accounts. River's blogs, as those of Mathew Burden written in Afghanistan, occupy a particularly fascinating space because of the immediacy with which witnessed truths are transmitted. Observes River, "nearly three years after this war, the buildings are still piles of debris. Electricity is terrible. Water is cut off for days at a time. Telephone lines come and go. Oil production isn't even at pre-war levels…" and creates a narrative that secures a collective expression of ordinary despair that derives its value from the proximity it has to the state of suffering. In this instance it is akin to war reportage and yet, as River

states in several entries, intentionally distant from the industries of journalistic truths and political analyses. For River "they," meaning the political analysts, anchors and experts in America, write about Iraq "with a detachment and lack of sentiment" that through its alignment with the nature of impartiality becomes little more than a reductive generalisation. The process from reduction to co-option within the larger discourse on the need for Iraqi reform is clear in River's mind and finds a voice in her denunciation of the Lancet study. She observes the discrepancies between the political rhetoric that reports the deaths in Iraq and the reality of how violence and death are linked to a crumbling infrastructure that is consequently, the result of the invasion. The point of departure in River's criticism, therefore, is the invocation of the need for accountability, a demand that is met by foregrounding the value of anger in the narration of the vicissitudes of the occupation era. Its deviation from the anger that is often the tone of anchors on popular news outlets reporting on the war lies in the ways in which it seeks to transform anger from a reaction to a method.

What does it mean for anger to be a methodological tool? In the case of Riverbend's blogs, its efficacy becomes apparent in the way it renders the Iraqi landscape comprehensible. The imagined State of Iraq has been invested severally with ideologised structures of fear, violence and political barbarism. Within the industry of American interpretation, the topography of Iraq is aligned with a philosophy of fear and distrust that comes from modern reports of sectarian conflicts that are then affiliated, historically, with a mythic view of an Oriental, barbaric past.[6] A coinage that exemplifies this understanding can be found in Paul Danahar's text *The New Middle East* where the analyst looks attributes the economic and moral problems of the Middle East to the rise and prevalence of "political Islam" (14). The phrase stands in for the verisimilitude of perspectives that comprehend the conjunction of religion and statehood by locating it amidst a broader configuration of the modern lack of democratic practices and a related moral economy that moves away from secularism. In other words, the many responses to the idea of the states that are predominantly Islamic contain, almost as a baseline, a collective vision that amalgamates the diverse nature of realities in these states within an overarching image of the religious other. As a result of this classification, the individual member states of the collective are rendered invisible. They are contributors to the fantastical story of the removed, foreign land where secular modernity is a distant dream alongside its recognisable facets, educated articulation, sophisticated rhetoric, nuanced critical insight and the ability to bear witness to the violence inherent in political projects of evangelical ideologies.

In attempting the difficult task of dispersing a diffused and largely held belief of the Iraqi state, River utilises the grammar of anger. She shapes the affective state such that it forms a cohesive unit around the Iraqi civilians. "We are tired" she says and creates a sense of community that is, at the core, agile enough to continue feeling the pangs of rage. This movement comes in spite of readings such as those of Kanan Makiya where the sense of fear and despair inform every structural policy in Iraq. Makiya's *Republic of Fear*, nuanced as though it is, distributes the emotions of fear and hopelessness in a manner that is suggestive of its constitutive nature within the very atmosphere of Iraq. River, on the other hand, expresses wonder that she is still able to be shocked and angered by the attacks in places like Karbala and Kadhimiya, a sentiment that coheres the affect of anger with the urgent need to fight the complacent fatigue that is born out of a state in conflict. "How is it," she writes, "that a border no one can see or touch stands between car bombs, militias, death squads and… peace, safety? ...I sit here and write this and wonder why I can't hear the explosions."

What strengthens these expressions of individual and collective experience is the form of the blog itself. In wartime Iraq, as both River and Salam Pax mention, the internet is a fickle medium. As a result, maintaining and running a blog or a website is a matter that is as ephemeral as the lives of those it narrates. With every new post, the medium of the text as a whole, achieves the particularly rich effect of a suspended yet banked excitement. Therefore, when River writes, "I was caught between a feeling of yearning... and a heavy feeling of dread" she is mimicking the fatigue of everyday suffering that surrounds her and inducing a cadence within the reader who like River is caught within the flux of the uncertain. The temporary nature of the blog, its restricted readership, the methods that are used to access it and the arrhythmic serialisation of the writing itself narrow the gap between the theory of war and the practice of its consumption. The reality, the witness and the consumer are bound together is a loosely held unit that gathers its critical strength and efficacy from the very nature of its transience. "Salam was commenting the other day on my weird blogging hour...during the war it was almost impossible to sleep," she writes and underscores how the form of her blog is emblematic of the disruptive rhythms that contemporary politics invites. Precarity is literalised and in so doing allows *Baghdad Burning* to become a particularly powerful criticism of the American invasion.

What the blog achieves in terms of its immediate impact or influence might be related to how it structures and circulates precarity. The temporary nature of the form works to destabilise the cohesive narrative that the content aspires to generate. That is to say, our previous formulation of the coherent, binding surface that creates a national imaginary that is different to the dominant

image of the 'Middle East' is, at once, both undermined and strengthened by the unpredictable spatial coordinates of the blog.[7] Insofar as it is part of a larger network where time and speed are measured in entirely subjective terms, the reception and longevity of the written word is subsumed within a larger subjectivised collective as well. Simply put, the nature of internet content is often related to how it is received and read. Since its motive is rarely the transformation into more materially acceptable and understood mediums such as the print industry, there is a level of treachery that is inbuilt into its very existence. A good example of the same is the state of River's blog after 2013. An electronic search of several archives entries yield the result 'Page Not Found,' a signifier of the erasable aspect of electronically sustained content. For someone unfamiliar with the mechanics of web pages and stability within the electronic networks, the absence of a text and the cumbersome search for its hidden presence might often be evidence enough of its dubious stability and reliability. These problematic implications and speculative gestures, as Suman Gupta in *Imagining Iraq* points out, inspire the community that consumes the blog form to enter into dynamic dialogues with the text, thereby imbuing it with its characteristic resistance to "victimised paralysis" (176).The consequences of such a process are manifold.

On one hand, it works to drive home the message that the process of representing truths witnessed by the eye is open to questions of veracity and authorship. On the other hand, however, this destabilising impulse of the form often reiterates the larger point that a possible subjective representation of truth does not call into question the ontology of it. That is to say, while readers might ask how truthful and trustworthy the eye-witness account is, it does not work to question the very fact that the event took place. In this, once again, the angry rhetoric of the blog works to avoid the deference of truths until the very fact that certain aspects of the invasion actually occurred become dispersed, forgotten and ultimately denied.

One of the ways that the blog achieves this veracity, and the corresponding resistance to dismissal, is by focusing on the rhythm of everyday life. Unlike Makiya's *Republic*, the issue of fear and the sense of impending doom that seems to overshadow Iraq is contextualised by the historical markers of everyday life."Tomorrow, if there's no electricity, we'll wash them by hand" writes River quoting her mother's remark on the state of their unwashed clothes. The disruption that conflict brings with it is surmised in a particularly pithy statement where the author mentions, "it's just normal-electrical outages, explosions and helicopters." In a landscape framed by the American troops and the mythic idea that Hussein's tyranny had transformed the Iraqis into little more than fearful passive subjects, these

depictions of ordinary occurrences work to ground textual unpredictability. *Baghdad Burning* illustrates the struggle between being overwhelmed by the moral economy of violence and being able to carve out a space to express anger while resisting co-option under the aegis of the angry Middle Eastern or the radical Islamist. Says River,

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 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…"

In expressing her dread at the state of things, the author delineates the gap between what the American narrative constructs as the truth of Iraq- a landscape always already saturated with violence, hatred and fear- and the consequences of attempting to rectify that myth through material intervention. In other words, what the rhetoric of anger achieves is an attempt to rupture an easy acceptance of what value war has in the contemporary landscape. In the case of the Iraq war, the moral project of American redemption and American safety has been amply demonstrated by such public speeches as George Bush's speech and the administration's policies. Bush famously aligned his war on terror with a misrepresented myth about the Crusades and despite receiving global criticism, achieved a de-historicised transference of Christian values that has often been the most convincing argument for American involvement in foreign conflict.[8] River's blog attempts to locate itself in junctures such as these and through articulations of anger and instances of precarity, draws the reader's attention to the fallacy of classifying conflicts as apocalyptic and invasions as messianic projects. The structure of her content and the form of electronic media work in tandem to create spaces within the public discourse for a presentation of that anger that is, therefore, revealed as a perspective with which to launch a nuanced critique of conflict rather than remaining reactionary alone.

Endnotes

[1]The delineation of the issues including anger, the Iraq invasion and the blog form follows from Suman Gupta's *Imagining Iraq.* This paper takes his argument on representations of ordinary life during the 2003 invasion further.

[2]The clearest expression of this comes from President Bush's speech mad the day after the 9/11 attacks where the 'they' versus 'us' debate recalls,

in many ways, Edward Said's theory of orientalism. For more, see 'The Washington Post's 2001 transcript of the speech and the articles written on terrorism and literature by Anthony Kubiak and others.

[3]For more, see Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture* and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotions.*

[4]Riverbend is a pseudonym and as the author signs off on her blogs using the shortened term 'River' going forward the paper will refer to her as the same.

[5]The phrases referred to have been taken from Riverbend's blog post the web address of which has been mentioned in the 'Works Cited' section of this paper. Since the website does not have page numbers, the same has not been included in every instance of a quoted line or phrase.

[6]If we revisit President Bush's speech that has been quoted in the introductory segment of this paper, the invocation of the Crusades in order to add value to the wars on terror, this observation on the American cultural imaginary becomes more apparent.

[7]Here, too, River's writing notes how the American narrative, especially in the news networks, reduces countries that have a dominant Islamic population to being constituents of the 'Middle East.' The coinage, she argues, pays little attention to geographical location and has come to stand in for an ideology that is reminiscent, to a degree, of Said's oriental states.

[8]The messianic impulse has been analysed amply by texts such as *The Empire of Trauma* by Fassin and Rechtman, Sandra Poppe's 2009 compilation et.al. on American literature post 9/11, among several others.

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