

Poetic encounters with war's 'others'

May God destroy your tank and your drone,
You who've destroyed my village, my home.¹

'Home' is a word soaked in feeling. It calls forth memories, emotions, attachment to a place that one belongs. For me, home feels warm; I am lucky. When a poem tells of home's destruction, that poem stirs colder feelings. Sadness, but not tears – *my* home is still intact, and the loss is not personal enough. Anger at 'you who've destroyed', and at the drones and tanks that blast away the homes of others. A sense that longing for justice, or more darkly, revenge, might under such circumstances feel irrepressible or overpowering.

War art, like poems spoken by Pashtun women in Afghanistan, can tell our emotions things we did not know about war. For some time, this piece was titled 'The other side of Western war'. I'd wanted to express an attempt to move beyond soldier-centric understandings of the recent war in Afghanistan, to imagine how it might be lived by Afghans. Eventually, I changed the title, unsatisfied with my designation of the war as 'Western' and thus belonging to 'us'. The question I wish to pose, clearer now than it was when I started, is this: can art, poetry, in this case, break down the binaries that cleave apart the humans of war into separable categories like 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other', and 'grievable' and 'un-grievable' (Bulter 2010)?

My posing this question follows eight years' critical study of veterans' stories. During this time I've interviewed dozens of British veterans and heard tales of trauma and injury. I've watched films and documentaries, and read memoirs by veterans narrating their wartime experiences. I've listened to podcasts, seen theatre productions, and heard veterans-as-researchers telling auto-ethnographic stories about war and its aftermath. Whatever understanding of war and its legacy I have cobbled together over the duration of this work has been grounded in the experiences and perspectives of military veterans. Despite my immersion in stories of war, in particular of the UK's longest and most recent war in Afghanistan, I feel ignorant of how war has effected the people who are subjected to our military violence. Afghans do, of course, feature in British soldier narratives of the war, but rarely if ever do they appear as fully rounded characters with needs, desires, and stories of their own. Instead they are 'flat' characters in the Western war narrative, 'Orientals' made to occupy various roles as formidable opponents, hapless junior military partners, backward villagers or ancient tribesmen (Woodward & Jenkins 2012). Sometimes they become objects of compassion, yet as Julia Welland (2015) has argued, the Afghans' plight functions mostly as a lens through which to view the suffering of soldiers themselves.

What must life be like, I wonder, for the people of Afghanistan? To call home this land that soldiers call a 'theatre'? How might it feel to live with *actual war* as the "intangible yet persistent background of everyday life" (Butler, 2010: 74)? While searching for Afghan stories of the war, I came across a book of Afghan poetry, and found it spoke powerfully about life in an era of perpetual conflict (Griswold & Murphy 2014). The book is a collection

¹ Excerpts from I AM THE BEGGAR OF THE WORLD translated by Eliza Griswold, photographs by Seamus Murphy. Text copyright © 2014 by Eliza Griswold. Reprinted with permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

of ‘landays’, short folk couplets recorded in Afghanistan in Pashto and translated into English by the poet Eliza Griswold, accompanied with photographs by Seamus Murphy. A landay, Griswold explains, is “an oral and often anonymous scrap of song created by and for mostly illiterate people: the more than twenty million Pashtun women who span the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan” (3). The collection inspired this piece, as it provided an opportunity to reflect on war as experienced and rendered poetically by the women of Afghanistan. In reading these poems, I seek a different knowledge of the war; one that originates not from the aggressor but which emerges, artfully and distinctively, from the mouths of the invaded and the colonised. This brief essay is my response – emotionally and intellectually – to these poems.

When drones come, only the Taliban’s sons
are brave enough to answer them.

Read as horrorism – that is, encounters with the violent violation of vulnerable humans in war (Weber 2014) – poetry makes invisible forms of destruction visible to audiences far removed from the violence. The aesthetic encounter with others’ suffering provokes emotive responses (Caso 2018), potentially enlarging our empathic vision in the process (Bennett 2005). The poems in Griswold and Murphy’s collection describe a world very different from my own, one in which drones stalk the skies, threatening death from above. ‘When drones come’, they are sinister, they bring fear; a “pervasive sensory terrorism” (McSorely 2019: 84). Because, in Britain, I can go about my everyday life without fear of bombs falling from the sky, I can only imagine, but imagine I try. In my mind’s eye I picture drones lurking in the sky above Chelmsford, the city in which I live. I wonder how my relationship with the space around me and the sky above might change. What would I no longer take for granted? How would I feel while walking to work, sitting at my desk, or playing with my daughter in the park? Might the walls of my home start to feel less solid, less stable, fracturing the feeling of security I have while sitting here and typing these words? How might my ordered life fall apart in response to the “deepening terror of living under the threat of drone strikes” (Griswold & Murphy 2014: 9). What would *I* do, and who would I be forced to trust to secure my family’s protection from that threat?

As my mind wanders I feel compelled to question whether my imagination could ever do justice to others’ experiences of being targeted by drones, and am forced to conclude that it cannot. Uncomfortable thoughts follow: is my reading of these poems voyeuristic? Am I consuming or objectifying the pain of others? Am I *stealing* it (Razack 2007)? What is the point of my empathy? Is it self-serving: making me feel more compassionate and less guilty about my own complicity in militarism? How do I resolve the tension of engaging with poems that are simultaneously ‘for me’ and ‘not for me’? *For me*, in the sense that Griswold has translated these poems into English in order to give Western audiences a different understanding of people about whom assumptions and judgements are constantly being made. *Not for me*, in the sense that this poetry is spoken by and for Pashtun women, and that in the narrative Griswold gives of its generation there is a strong sense of hesitancy – and of risk – on the part of these women making their poems available to a foreign journalist. Uncomfortable questions do not produce easy answers, but rather complicate any straightforward reading of these poems.

Your eyes aren't eyes. They're bees.
I can find no cure for their sting.

The landays in the collection deal with different subjects including love and marriage, grief and separation, the Afghan homeland, and war. Poems like the one above – alive with aesthetic beauty and wit – are proof that Afghanistan cannot be summed up by ‘horror’ alone. They tell a different story from the common ‘tragic’ narrative whereby Afghanistan is depicted as ‘the worst place in the world to be a woman’ (Bohn 2018), and as ranking bottom or near-bottom of numerous global development indices (Ledwidge 2015). Many of the poems are bawdy, vivacious and rebellious. Often subversive in nature, as Griswold writes, the landays “frustrate any facile image of a Pashtun woman as nothing but a mute ghost beneath a blue burqa” (Griswold & Murphy 2014; p. 4). Poetry introduces us to people different from ourselves, and provides us with an opportunity to know them differently (Gibson & Falley 2019). In my reading of these poems, Afghans become much more than the curious but silent backdrop to the stories Western veterans tell about war in Afghanistan. No longer are they simply the subjects of Western military violence: no longer ‘bodies’ to be ‘counted’. Instead, they are complex, artful, and deeply human. These poems show that great beauty exists, and that humanity cannot be annihilated, even in the midst of a society torn apart by decades of conflict.

The talib's body lies under the dirt.
His orphans grieve at the head of his grave.

Landays show us the costs of war for ordinary Afghans. Whether this poem is a mockery of the Taliban, a lament over the death of a talib fighter, or something else entirely, to me matters little. What counts is the grief expressed within it; that the death of a Taliban fighter – a cause for celebration among many Westerners – also results in grief and suffering for orphaned children.

In her book *Frames of war* (2010), Judith Butler asks us to consider ‘when is life grievable?’ In one sense, we might say that life is grievable when others exist to grieve for that life, rendering Taliban lives eminently grievable by those who suffer as a result of their loss. But how far are ‘we’ – who look from faraway places of safety upon the violence in Afghanistan – willing to extend our ‘thoughts and prayers’, if not our grief? Is it only lives destroyed on the streets of London or New York that are capable of moving us toward outrage? What about the destruction of life by suicide bombers in Kabul? Or civilians, reclassified as ‘collateral’, in rural Helmand? When something does move us, like images of a dead toddler² washed up on a beach, for how long do we stay connected with the outrage? Where, when, and how are *these* deaths remembered? It seems the loss and suffering endured by ‘the other side’ is systematically written out of the Western war narrative, and of the ways we commemorate and memorialise war (Sylvester 2018). Following Butler’s question, I want to know what it would take to dissolve the distinction between grievable and ungrievable life, and whether encountering Afghan poetry could help us grasp the situation of potential precariousness that we share with all humans living under war?

² Alan Kurdi

If poetry succeeds in enlarging empathic vision – that *feeling for* another whilst recognising the different, irreducible, and still inaccessible nature of their experiences (Bennett 2005) – it surely performs important moral work. But its success in this regard is contingent upon responses characterised by critical thought, rather than by apathy, ambiguity, and a refusal to extend one’s empathy beyond the confines of one’s own situation. Whereas art is certainly capable of shocking us into thinking more critically about war, as Cynthia Weber (2014) argues, we ought to treat sceptically any suggestion that thought might necessarily lead to action or resistance. “Poetry is the anti-bomb, the anti-border” write poets Gibson and Falley (2019: 47). And yet bombs still fly, and borders stand. Is the moral work of poetry really so important – and does empathy really matter at all – if nothing changes?

Yet even if we disregard the failing political promise of empathy, is it still possible for poetry to carry out political work? On one hand, I wonder how critical poetry might even be co-opted into mainstream discourses on war? I am reminded, for instance, of the British centenary commemorations of World War One, during which war poetry – such as Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce et Decorum est*, which graphically depicts the horror of war – was used repeatedly for acts of remembrance which reproduced war “as a matter of sacrifice” (Basham 2016: 885), ultimately erasing the violence of war and replacing it with celebration. Yet, when I think about these Afghan landays, I wonder too how they might disrupt the dominant narratives of the war in Afghanistan? How might they sever the rhetoric of hawkish politicians spouting off their ‘pride’ about what our armed forces are doing ‘over there’? Is there something about folk poetry, composed anonymously by ordinary Afghan women, which could reach across checkpoints and borders to communicate the *feeling* of war brought to one’s home or village? Could it help to shift the established norms of recognition (Butler 2010) which render an Afghan life of radically unequal value to a British or an American one? Ultimately, could it ever help to make the death and suffering of war’s ‘others’ truly count?

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