

Article

Translating the Enemy in the ‘Terp’: Three Representations in Contemporary Afghan War Fiction

Steven K. Johnson

School of Arts and Sciences, Southern New Hampshire University, Manchester, NH 03106, USA;
s.johnson5@snhu.edu

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Abstract: This essay examines the ambivalent relationships between American soldiers deployed to Afghanistan and their unit interpreters in recent fictional works by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, Luke Mogelson, and Will Mackin. In these works, the interpreter characters often occupy the liminal space between who is a friend and who is an enemy, serving as an ally to American military units while also reflecting projections of soldiers’ assumptions about the enemy in relation to themselves. Most prominent in encounters with ‘terps’ are the discursive tactics employed intentionally and institutionally as boundaries by American forces that attempt to keep terps ‘othered’—particularly tactics that prevent terps from exhibiting idealized American masculinity, and those of Islamophobic racism. The three terps in the study point to a rupture in the optimistic views about multiculturalism, where the terp translates an awareness of a cultural chasm instead of a bridge. In fictional narratives, more than finding agency in crossing boundaries, terps are fundamental in signifying where boundaries exist as they are caught in their interstices, as well as in critiquing the sources of those boundaries.

Keywords: war writing; war literature; masculinity; Islamophobia; interpreter; Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya; Will Mackin; Luke Mogelson; Afghanistan

1. Introduction

Direct contact with the enemy in contemporary war fiction generally depicts encounters where weapons and technology keep most of the enemy physically distant, briefly glimpsed, or entirely hidden, and where techniques of propaganda and military training keep the enemy portrayed as a two-dimensional villain—the Other, *par excellence*. Michael Hedges notes that war-related othering of the enemy is a common ploy of nationalism, as “all who oppose our allies and us . . . are lumped into one indistinguishable mass. They are as faceless as we are for our enemies” (Hedges 2002, p. 9). Indeed, crafting the enemy as the Other has a lineage that extends from practices of early warfare and which continues into contemporary world culture (Gay 1993; Hedges 2002). Beyond nationalism, Joanna Bourke recognizes that dehumanizing the enemy has maintained and spurred the will to fight wars in the 20th Century despite the desensitizing and machine-like aspects of modern war (Bourke 1999). And in the West, over the past twenty or so years, the othered enemy has shifted from the enemy of Communism to that of Islamic extremism (Büyükgözü 2016). Indeed, the Islamic enemy continues to be narratively constructed as a two-dimensional Islamic terrorist Other whose singular purpose is to destroy the West. Such a narrative construction of the enemy in contemporary fiction about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan extends well beyond the battlefield, and includes soldiers’ encounters with foreign places, languages, religion, civilians, and death (Peebles 2011, pp. 101–3). Indeed, many recent fictional works and films about these wars readily reinforce such a simplistic narrative of American heroes battling villainous Islamic terrorists, or American heroes battling their own demons while an incidental terrorist enemy continually lurks as a threat to all in the war zone.

Three recent fictional works about the American wars in Afghanistan complicate this simplistic relationship to the enemy, however, through the use of characters serving in the role of interpreter, or 'terp' as American troops refer to them. The similarities between the terps in these disparate texts are surprising, and thus they are important narratives, as all three use the character of the terp to initiate more complex representations of Afghans and insert them into the written cultural memory of the war. In these narratives, the terp, a character type lacking adequate scholarship—especially in regards to contemporary writing—frequently emerges as one who is able to speak for and represent the enemy when the enemy cannot be found, critiquing the motives of American allies while likewise revealing the shortsightedness of their Islamophobic assumptions about their enemy. The terp adds depth and complexity to representations of the enemy, often simultaneously reinforcing and critiquing misguided beliefs about the enemy in the enemy's absence. In this way, the terp concurrently represents both an ally and an Other to American characters. While the role of real interpreters in Iraq and Afghanistan has been to assist American military units to bridge linguistic and cultural differences as they interact and engage with the local populace, the character of the terp also functions as a figurative boundary crosser who straddles languages, cultures, world views, religious beliefs, and sometimes sides. In this role of ambivalence, the terp sometimes mediates and sometimes reiterates the two-dimensional beliefs about the enemy's culture, race, and ethnicity. The terp thus serves as a trope, a turn in the liminal space where American soldiers encounter the Other, one with the possible risk of actually being the enemy disguised as friend (a spy), but also one who runs counter to soldiers' Islamophobic expectations, often foiling the preconceptions that American characters have about the enemy they are fighting. Such boundary crossing always comes with a cost for the terps, though. Not only are they viewed with Islamophobic suspicion by the American forces they serve, but also as traitors and pawns of the occupiers to their countrymen, leaving the terp with an alienated and ambivalent identity. Terps often find themselves to be everyone's enemy, learning that there is inherent conflict with everyone in every act of interpretation. Mostly, in crossing boundaries, terps draw attention to the discourses of conflict initiated by American forces along with their ambivalent effects. In fictional narratives, more than finding agency in crossing boundaries, terps are fundamental in signifying where boundaries exist as they are caught in their interstices, as well as in critiquing the sources of those boundaries. In a world where the enemy is always already othered, the terp provides a literary engagement with the (im)possibilities of overcoming the other subject position.

This paper examines the role of three terps who experience the implications of alienation and ambivalence as a result of the boundaries they confront and attempt to cross. These stories employ the interpreter character in a role of new-found importance in American war writing, given the actual and frequent use of small unit interpreters by the US military in both Iraq and Afghanistan. These characters have not been adequately addressed in the critical analysis of contemporary war literature. *The Watch* by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya retells an updated version of Sophocles' "Antigone" set in a remote US Army outpost in Afghanistan (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012). The unit's new Dari interpreter, Farid Humayun Masood Attar—shortened to just "Masood" by the Americans—loosely follows the role of Antigone's sister, Ismene. Like Ismene, Masood would submissively follow the decrees of those in power, were it not for the dialogs he has with the novel's rebellious Antigone figure, Nizam, who arrives at the American outpost seeking to bury her brother who was killed in a battle with the Americans. Like Ismene, Masood struggles with the incongruity of stated American ideals (which he finds empowering) and the military practices and attitudes that often violate those principles, especially when non-Americans are involved. In his boundary crossing between American culture and the complex practices of Pashtun and Dari cultures in Afghanistan, Masood's hope in the American ideals of freedom and liberal democracy are confronted by the shortcomings of American soldiers, who are sexist, racist, Islamophobic, and homophobic. At the same time, Masood faces reprimand and rejection from his countrywoman Nizam for his disrespect to the Afghan dead—a betrayal of Afghan culture and Islamic belief—and for his inability to navigate the difference between morality and legality. As a terp, Masood copes his own ambivalence about the resulting miscarriage of justice.

Luke Mogelson's short story "New Guidance" is narrated by the Afghan-American interpreter Roohullah, whose name his American counterparts have shortened to "Roo" (Mogelson 2016). Raised in the United States by immigrants, Roo identifies with the American military, and with being American, even as he suffers from racist American attitudes. He also finds a strong identification with an Afghan soldier during his deployment who confronts Roo with the shortcomings of America's stated goals in Afghanistan. In the story, the American unit withdraws from its combat partnership with an Afghan infantry platoon in its fight against the Taliban, which leaves the Afghan National Army (ANA) unit in a precarious and ultimately losing position in its fight against the Taliban. At the story's end, Roo finds that his loyalty to the Americans has never been returned in kind, compounded by the fact he feels he has let down the Afghan platoon who, though abandoned by the American unit, continues to fight until it is destroyed. As with Masood, it is through Roo that American injustice is fully signified. After inquiring at a reunion about the status of the ANA platoon, Roo realizes not only the platoon's fate, but his own: "I waited for the major to tell me what had happened. I waited and waited and then, as I waited, I realized I didn't need to be told" (Mogelson 2016, p. 62).

In a variation of this theme, Joe (a name anglicized by Americans from Jamaluddein) operates as a SEAL Team terp in Afghanistan, and as a minor character in Will Mackin's story "The Lost Troop" (Mackin 2018). Joe haunts the narrator's thoughts as the bored SEAL team tries to generate meaningful missions in Afghanistan once the initial fighting appears to have subsided: "His voice, with its derived British accent and perpetual tone of disappointment, exactly matched that of my beleaguered conscience" (Mackin 2018, p. 8). While Joe helps the narrator grapple with his guilt about the loss of a comrade ("It wasn't your fault," says Joe to the narrator), the SEAL team and Joe are readily collaborating by story's end, undertaking a morally suspect revenge mission to detain a martinet school teacher from Joe's childhood who is quite uninvolved in the war (Mackin 2018, p. 13). Instead of simply recognizing the injustice of Americans, Joe willingly joins the SEAL team in bringing unjust and violent action to his countrymen.

In these three fictional works, the terp mediates between languages, between cultural engagements, between religions, between violence and peace, between who is a friend and who is an enemy. Such mediation appears to result in ambivalent and melancholic self-hoods for the characters, even as the terps also mediate the injustice of America's role in the Forever War. And yet, something is lost in translation, and while the terps draw out the Islamophobia and the willful cultural ignorance of American forces in Afghanistan, they offer no insight for resolution or agency. The terps are key translators of critique even as they appear to reconstruct cultural difference. In all three stories, the character of the terp certainly engages American cultural assumptions about its enemy, but as a trope, the interpreter is a figurative turn against the dominant American narrative that insists the war in Afghanistan has been waged justly, and to the benefit of Afghans.

2. Interpreting Cultural Hybridity

The role of the terp as boundary-crosser and cultural intermediary is a realistic aspect of the stories examined by this paper and reflects the documented role of real interpreters who have participated in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars since 2001. Indeed, before the Forever Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, interpreters have historically been used at high levels of command and for collecting military intelligence, while tactical roles on the battlefield have been uncommon (Baigorri-Jalon 2011; Campbell 2016, p. 63). Indeed, the consistent and intentional use of professional interpreters in small military units is relatively new to American military practice, and the role often results in social alienation for the terp. Mihaela Tălpaș notes the alienated role of the terp in her recent study, where professional interpreters in Afghanistan are seen as a danger "both by the . . . coalition forces and by the local community," a risk both militarily and socially in their many roles—interpreting language and mediating culture and religion (Tălpaș 2016, p. 241). Thus, real interpreters' loyalties are often uncertain both to the military and to the local populace, even as they make important contributions and interventions that ease tension and that potentially reduce violence. This undervalued but important

work carries personal costs for these interpreters. In her observations about interpreters serving in Iraq, Madeline Otis Campbell notes a complex situation, where the terp's crossing of linguistic borders exemplifies the "dilemmas of identification" as linguistic boundaries intersect with cultural ones (Campbell 2016, p. 61):

[I]n taking on the language of the occupation, the subject finds recognition and a certain degree of freedom . . . she asks to no longer be the other. Navigating the translation encounter thus raises questions of loyalty and identity on multiple registers for wartime interpreters: not only at the level of perceived political allegiances but also at the personal level of subjective recognition and interpellation into the dominant discourses of the occupier. (Campbell 2016, p. 80)

Campbell's recognition of this complex and ambivalent position of the interpreters in crossing languages and cultures follows Homi Bhabha's recognition of the ambivalence that is taken up in moments of cultural hybridity, moments that are both a product of colonization and simultaneously the potential locus for subversion, "where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics" (Bhabha 1994, p. 25). Bhabha theorizes that agency in hybridity occurs when liminality results in the impossibility of identity, when "other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (Bhabha 1994, p. 114). Campbell claims to be a witness to an act of subversive hybridity in one terp's use of cultural jokes that plays on the unwitting assumptions of American visitors who are trying to connect across cultural boundaries (Campbell 2016, pp. 64–65). As Campbell analyzes the interactions of interpreters in Iraq, she recognizes how they frequently take on varied subject positions and apply different strategies in achieving their goals. This hybridity that Campbell observes is not an aspect that emerges with the fictional terps.

Like their real counterparts, fictional terps take on the roles of cross-cultural mediators, but in moving from an observation of the real into a representation of the imagined, the three terps in this study never show the fluid hybridity that Campbell observes, as they do not work from positions that offer subversion or agency. In this way, the representative characters of terps diverge from Campbell's careful observations. In bridging the real to the fictional, it is important to consider the cross-cultural experiences of the terps, and whether they serve in furtherance of the dominant discourse of American military occupations of Afghanistan, or if they serve as critical resistance, as narrative subversion in the dominant discourse. It is fitting that such ambivalence is represented within the fiction of war and conflict, since, in its most generic sense, a war zone represents the space of chaos, a space where order is upended, where power is contested. Within such a narrative space, terps bridge the linguistic understanding of the characters who speak different languages, and can also interpret for readers the structures of social power through their own situational ambivalence. The ambivalence within the character of the terp exemplifies a pervasive anxiety about cultural identity, and it expresses its own ambivalence about cultural identity as resistant to both American Islamophobia and to the enemy motives of extremism in Afghanistan.

Such anxiety is connected to concerns about the stability of identity. Anthropologist Baruch Shimoni suggests that the boundary crossing of cultural hybridity is an individual balance of crossing and defending borders: "A sense of boundaries can be indicated by the extent to which people consciously or unconsciously want to keep or change what is perceived by them as their cultural borders" (Shimoni 2006, p. 217). Such borders are always imagined and subjectively experienced (Shimoni 2006). In this way, the character of the terp can be understood as a site where a culture war is actually being fought, addressing areas of perceived cultural danger in the signification of cultural boundaries, as well as being the interpreter of where such boundaries actually exist. A better understanding of hybridity in these narratives thus requires consideration of how the terp simultaneously critiques and exemplifies American perceptions of who (and what) is the enemy through the symbolic boundaries that terps confront. The most pronounced boundaries in these

narratives include those of American gender norms, as well as ubiquitous American forms of racist Islamophobia. As terps interact with American characters, these particular areas are continually probed. The terps navigate their own encounters with the aggressive masculinity and racist attitudes of American soldiers and SEALs, often finding that while they are encountering these boundaries, no American truly reciprocates in the liminal space. Indeed, the actions of American military characters tend to resist crossing cultural boundaries, keeping themselves in and others out.

3. Interpreting Masculinity

Since *The Iliad*, the Western warrior has been measured against an idyllic aggressive masculinity that continues into representations of the American military. As Peebles notes, “Accounts from Homer to O’Brien . . . reveal how life as a soldier affects his conception of manhood or masculinity. War can make (or unmake) the man—and today it is a proving ground for women as well” (Peebles 2011, p. 2). While Peebles finds varied American voices weighing in on the Iraq war experience—not just that of the white male—masculinity is nonetheless alive and well and dominant in the Iraq War (Peebles 2011, p. 100). Warfare’s role in man-making is not surprising, as the narratives of war have long remembered fighting in war as a *par excellence* performance of masculinity (Braudy 2003; Ehrenreich 1997). Moreover, that idealized, aggressive masculinity in part perpetuates war: “Warfare and aggressive masculinity have been . . . mutually reinforcing cultural enterprises. War making requires warriors, that is ‘real’ men,’ and the making of warriors requires war” (Ehrenreich 1997, p. 129). Western war narratives continue to reconstruct a cultural memory that values and identifies with both patriarchy and aggressive violence. Thus, encounters between non-Western interpreters and American soldiers bring cultural boundaries of masculinity to the forefront, especially those that undermine the perceived masculinity of the enemy. And in narratives where the enemy is not present as a character, the terp comes to bear emasculation, thwarted from inclusion with American identifications.

In *The Watch*, the terp Masood confronts American gender norms upon his arrival at the fictional Tarsadan Outpost in Afghanistan. A helicopter delivers him shortly after a battle that killed and wounded of the Americans stationed there. And while Masood arrives ready to join with American forces and do his best, he is readily identified and degraded by the American soldiers for exhibiting effeminacy. As Masood walks across camp, one soldier shouts to the soldier escorting Masood, “Wo dat, Sarn’t? . . . Dude walks like a lady! Who, who . . . ” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 98). Such observations confuse Masood, who, unlike the American soldiers, is quite comfortable describing American men as “beautiful” and admiring their physical forms in ways that surpass the boundaries of normalized American masculinity (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, pp. 94–95, 107). Masood is further confused as he eats a meal alone with Simonis, the unit sniper who identifies himself as both gay and a killer. Through his conversation with Simonis, Masood struggles to navigate the Americans’ binary boundaries, especially those existing at the intersections of homosociality and masculinity. Indeed, Masood expresses a deep and complex view of cultural friendship, which includes sexual attraction, but that does not rest in a singular sexual orientation. When Simonis’ makes several passes at Masood, he misinterprets them as simply the overtures of friendship. In Masood’s experience, a man is not either/or, but both/and. The dialog with Simonis leaves Masood “completely confused as if I have just had an encounter with a member of an alien race” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 114). Other American soldiers are quick to deride Masood for what they perceive to be his sexual orientation: “Fruit’s as gay as Father Christmas. Fuckin’ loud and queer” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 117). In the homosocial space of the all-male American camp, heteronormative masculinity is prized, and any male performance that signifies other possibilities is quickly derided and marginalized so as not to disrupt the dominant cultural belief in masculinity. Masood’s signified femininity immediately reduces Masood’s relevance and value, even as it critiques the American perspective. In the military community of Tarsadan outpost, heterosexual masculinity is a boundary that cannot be crossed easily, and it perpetuates a cultural belief of American superiority that permeates the unit.

Roo is similarly unrecognized as masculine by the Americans, treated like a child instead of as effeminate. And while he implicitly identifies with the American soldiers for whom he interprets, his childlike naiveté about the war around him and his own confusion about his motives in returning to Afghanistan underscore the childlike nickname the Americans have given him, “Roo,” (who is also the toddler kangaroo from A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Poo*). Relegated to the subject position of the child, Roo frames the state of war through his own innocence. He not only interprets conversations between American Major Karzowski and Afghan Lieutenant Mustafa from this place, but also navigates between his identifications with both American and Afghan cultural values, as he physically crosses and recrosses through a boundary wall between the American and ANA barracks. Instead of resulting in hybrid agency for Roo, he finds only confusion as he is unable to live up to the ideals of either side. Americans and Afghans alike remind him of his inexperience and naiveté in emasculating ways, as Roo attempts to live up to the ‘big brother’ figures of both Major Karzowski and Lieutenant Mustafa. During a meal, Karzowski relegates Roo to the role of child by answering for him as adults are prone to do, and by defending Roo from the teasing of other American soldiers. Similarly, Mustafa scolds Roo throughout the narrative, as an older brother might a child, for not living up to Afghan cultural ideals: “He stared right at me until I literally hung my head [. . .] I understood that it was meant as a reminder, a rebuke” (Mogelson 2016, p. 49). Childlike, Roo’s identity dwells in the interstices between American and Afghan ideals, unable to act like a man in either culture, and he is thus rejected by both.

Like Masood and Roo, Jamaluddein also has his name shortened: to “Joe” by the Navy SEALs for whom he interprets. Since he is “a middle-aged man,” his age and experience are less of an issue to the SEALs, so instead of questioning Joe’s masculinity, they generally ignore him (Mackin 2018, p. 8). Joe has a lesser role in the story than Masood and Roo, and he is nearly invisible until its end. Joe emerges as a character only as aggression emerges as the liminal space against which to signify his masculinity in relation to that of the Americans. In comparison to the SEAL team, Joe is generally ignored and irrelevant because he is not a warrior: “He wore armor on missions, but he carried no weapons” (Mackin 2018, p. 8). The narrator further states that Joe walks a little too close to the narrator for his own protection, indicating a lack of bravery by Joe while among a group of respected warriors. Though Joe enters the story as a disembodied voice, he becomes more present when he suggests that the SEAL team help him avenge a primary school teacher “who used to hit my knuckles with a ruler” (Mackin 2018, p. 14). Through this suggestion of gratuitous aggressive action, Joe becomes more embraced by the SEALs. When, at the end, the team surrounds the teacher’s house instead of taking up a weapon, Joe raises a bullhorn and shouts the words from the end of Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2)”: “If you don’t eat your meat, you can’t have any pudding! How can you have any pudding if you don’t eat your meat!” (Mackin 2018, p. 19). While Mackin does not provide readers with the first-person insights to Joe that Masood’s and Roo’s stories provide, there is an implication that Joe’s bullhorn loaded with words are as weaponized as the rifles and grenades of the SEAL team, and that unlike Roo and Masood, he is accepted when he embraces aggression as one of the team (Mackin 2018). But as Joe does not reappear in any of Mackin’s other stories like some of the other characters, the final analysis of Joe is unclear. He simply disappears. What is clear is that the SEALs and Joe alike relish the opportunity to take aggressive action against symbols of educational authority, though the SEALs have weapons and Joe has words.

If the terps mediate American beliefs about the enemy that are mostly unseen, that mostly blend in with the populace, all three terps do not measure up to the dominant belief about American masculinity represented through American characters—either as measured against indicators of femininity, adolescence, or aggression. In doing so, the characters complicate this American perspective by drawing attention to the inadequacy of such beliefs, while they are arguably more intuitive than the Americans in interpreting the complex situations in which they participate. Masood is more effective in understanding the American injustice to Nizam, Roo recognizes the American injustice of leaving the ANA platoon to fight on its own, and Joe joins the Americans in unjustly detaining his old school teacher. Through each, there is an estrangement of the dominant discourse of masculinity.

4. Interpreting Racism

Even more than drawing out beliefs of American masculine dominance, American military characters perpetuate Islamophobic racism—a pervasive cultural fear that ineptly conflates race, ethnicity, and religious practice into collective anti-Islamic beliefs. Islamophobia manifests in the recognition of hierarchic differences based on skin color, dress codes, cultural backgrounds, and religious beliefs (Büyükgözü 2016, p. 230). Indeed, Western portrayals of Islam fundamentally misunderstand the existing diversity within the religion, assuming instead that it is a singular nation (Afshar 2013). Judith Butler writes extensively about the American relegation of Islam to a subhuman status through varied and various conceptual cultural frames that render dominant anti-Islamic discourse effective (Butler [2009] 2016). Butler analyzes American actions in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan and considers the incongruities and various illogics that underlie such frames. Ultimately for Butler, Islamophobia stems from the frames that diffuse the national and cultural discourse of difference—one that is not always clearly or transparently racist, but one that articulates a sustainable cultural narrative of superiority over the othered enemy:

When a population appears as a direct threat to my life, they do not appear as “lives,” but as the threat to life (a living figure that figures the threat to life). Consider how this is compounded under those conditions in which Islam is seen as barbaric or pre-modern, as not yet having conformed to those norms that make the human recognizable. Those we kill are not quite human, and not quite alive, which means that we do not feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we do over the loss of those lives that bear national or religious similarity to our own. (Butler [2009] 2016, p. 42)

In this concise statement, she explains the conditions for creating and sustaining a cultural narrative about an enemy that maintains discursive animosity through primitive characterizations of difference. As with masculinity, terps bear these two-dimensional Islamophobic projections in the narratives, both reiterating and complicating the Islamophobic assumptions of Americans within war narratives. Ultimately, reading Butler in the terps underscores that while terps are supposed to mediate cultures, they are instead caught in between cultures, wedged in the gulf that exists, unable to bridge it.

In *The Watch*, Masood draws critical attention to the callous Islamophobia of American soldiers. While he is not the only character in the narrative who bears racist comments and actions, his role as an interpreter gives him a unique perspective as American soldiers continually fail to live up to his expectations about their commitment to justice through “democracy, freedom, and the rule of law”: “I don’t do politics” says the American soldier Simonis to Masood’s dismay (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 109). Arriving the day after several American soldiers have been killed or wounded in an attack on the base, Masood’s experience with the American’s is one of invisibility, and when he is finally seen by them, it is only and always sub-human, an object of derision and suspicion. In a very short span of time, Americans call him “raghead” and “Paco,” and hears his countrymen referred to as “hajjis” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, pp. 102–9). The derogatory terms themselves show the Americans conflating skin color with dress, religious belief, and derisive terms for other ethnicities. This influence comes to bear on Masood when he views the corpses of the insurgents who attacked the Americans: “I begin to feel a reluctant kinship with them—one that I cannot but help contrast to the way I’ve been made to feel inside the base” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 103). Combined with his femininity, Masood is constructed and framed by Americans as an object of derision, of lesser worth.

In his role as an interpreter, Masood straddles the boundary between his identities as an American supporter and as an Afghan. On the one hand, he attempts to help the Americans thwart Nizam—the book’s Antigone—from burying her brother by manipulating his knowledge of Islamic burial rituals: “You are a woman. You have no role in a Muslim burial. We are many men here. We’ll take care of it” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 7). On the other, he is aware of his beliefs in the face of the unjust way in which the Americans treat Nizam. “You’re a believer, aren’t you?” Nizam asks Masood. “You know this is wrong” (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 14). Masood only responds with “a quick, anxious glance,”

and then avoids all eye contact altogether (Roy-Bhattacharya 2012, p. 15). Like Ismene, who gradually comes to share her sister Antigone's views about immoral laws and state sanctioned violence, Masood begins to recognize injustice through American disrespect of not the living but the dead.

In "New Guidance," Roo also bears racist attitudes from the soldiers with whom he serves. The Americans assume incorrectly that Roo is Muslim since he originally grew up in Kabul. In a culturally insensitive manner, the unit's commanding officer tries to grasp Islamic dietary practices regarding shellfish: "He frowned at [Roo]. 'Muslims,' he said. 'They eat lobster?'" Karzowski quickly points out that "Roo's no Muslim" as if being a Muslim is an issue or a surprise, and Roo then corrects the Commanding Officer: "You're thinking of pigs" (Mogelson 2016, p. 51). The short conversation punctures the simplistic lens through which Americans attempt to frame a complex and intricate culture as barbaric. Americans incorrectly understand the dietary restrictions of Islam, and incorrectly assume that Roo would know because he practices Islam. Karzowski's quick response (speaking for Roo) feels as much like a protective defense as it does an explanation. Roo knows the answer because his parents were Muslim. "'If you're not Muslim,' the CO asked me, 'what are you?'" Roo has no answer to this insensitive question of identity (Mogelson 2016, p. 52). Indeed, Mogelson's story then further frames the Americans as the barbarians in the room as they quickly shift the dinner conversation to whether it would be easier to give up eating pork or to give up sex. Roo's character serves to interpret all that is racist and wrong in this conversation.

Coincidental to the plot of *The Watch*, the Americans for whom Roo works also bungle their response to Islamic funeral rites when an ANA soldier is killed in a Taliban ambush. Like Masood, Roo is caught in the middle, interpreting. As American forces refuse to evacuate the dead soldier's body due to command guidance, Roo attempts to convince Major Karzowsky of the urgency of the matter: "He should be buried soon . . . It's a Muslim thing" (Mogelson 2016, p. 55). Yet the Americans are unmoved and force the Afghans to wait four days for an Afghan Air Force helicopter to arrive. In the meantime, American helicopters arrive and depart from the base, bringing Roo woolen socks and chocolates from home, all of which he shares with the Afghan platoon. In response, Lieutenant Mustafa takes Roo to the truck where the dead soldier is being stored, and as a rebuke to the American injustice, he makes Roo look at and smell the corpse to help Roo understand that Rahim's death is of far less importance for Americans than chocolate and socks. In this moment, Mustafa confronts Roo with what amounts to Butler's point: it is Islam, not the Taliban, that appears to be the enemy, and that thus receive subhuman treatment from the Americans. It is in Roo's liminal position between the Americans and the Afghans that interprets this discrepancy, though Roo does not understand the magnitude and his role in it until the story's end.

Joe is absent for much of "The Lost Troop," floating in and out like a phantom. He is not mentioned until several pages into the narrative when, as the narrator minimally desecrates an Afghan cemetery by removing a rock from a grave and throwing it into a chasm, Joe emerges to scold, "I would expect such disrespectful behavior from the Taliban . . . but not from you" (Mackin 2018, p. 7). Where Masood and Roo passively accepted American injustice regarding burials, Joe actively confronts the SEALs. Chastened, the narrator recovers and replaces the rock back on the grave. And when the SEALs deposit the ashes of their dead comrade Yaz on the spot where he died, Joe again appears suddenly behind the narrator, unexpectedly, to clear the narrator's conscience. Joe remains a phantom until he assuages the narrator's guilt: "It wasn't your fault" (Mackin 2018, p. 13). Most notable here is that again funeral rites and their desecration are at stake. Joe, like Masood and Roo, has an active role in showing injustice to the Americans, declaring it to them in their own language, and then trying to comfort the narrator when the SEALs conduct their own funeral. And more than Masood and Roo, Joe turns American Islamophobic fears back on the Americans. The Americans are behaving like the Taliban, the worst version of Islam that Americans can imagine, and indeed playing to that assumption that all of Islam shares the Taliban's motives.

As noted earlier in this study, Joe also helps the SEALs plan a mission that ultimately harasses Joe's former school teacher who lives a solitary life deep in the woods, uninvolved in the war.

The subsequent mission unfolds with the building tension of a high school prank. With Joe shouting through his bullhorn, the SEAL team quickly capture the elderly school teacher, bind his wrists, and leave him kneeling on the ground asking the SEALs what he had done: “We didn’t answer. Rather, we left him, knees bleeding . . . Then we burst into his cabin to see how he lived” (Mackin 2018, p. 19). While Joe has joined the SEALs, it is a misguided and unjust use of force that leaves the ‘barbaric’ and ‘pre-modern’ Afghan teacher treated like an exotic animal, less than human.

5. Concluding Discussion

Three terps, one from a novel and two from short stories, do not make an overwhelming case, and they raise more questions than they answer. And yet, their similar roles in these different war narratives is remarkable. Of note, they represent a technique in recent war writing that enables American characters interaction with someone like the enemy, but who also claims not to be. While the majority of war writing about the Forever War focuses on American soldiers and their experiences, the interpreter allows for contact and dialogue with a representative of the ‘enemy’s’ culture. In these interactions, the terps do not so much bridge culture as demonstrate the chasm between them. Instead of connecting cultures, Masood and Roo find themselves stuck in between, and Joe is mostly ignored until he participates with the American SEALs in wanton aggression against his old teacher. These three works of fiction reveal a seam in the writing about American wars since 2004, whereby Americans exhibit no interest in multiculturalism, but rather continue to extend the trajectory of domination. If the terp translates nothing else in these stories, it is this reiterative desire to want to be American or to be like America in the face of those who have no desire to connect. Even as Masood and Roo attempt to connect and identify, the Americans create and extend boundaries that thwart hybridity in these stories. While the terp offers an opportunity to consider boundary crossing amidst the chaos of war, what emerges instead is a projection, albeit sometimes critical, of American beliefs about their enemy, as seen through asserting American masculine ideals and through Islamophobic beliefs.

Terps appear in other recent works, too, including Robinson’s and Kovite’s *War of the Encyclopaedists* (Robinson and Kovite 2015) and Phil Klay’s short story “Psychological Operations,” in *Redeployment* (Klay 2014), and so there are certainly additional characters to consider in extending our understanding about how the terp functions in war writing. Moreover, there are many opportunities for additional research to understand the historical context of terps with other interpreters in Western war literature—not only how the literary interpreter differs from the historical one, but also how reading military interpreters open our historical understanding of cultural encounters. There is little detailed work that considers the representative role of interpreters in both fiction and non-fiction, those who live at the threshold between languages and cultures, between friends and enemies, as subjects of power. There is more work to be done in extending our understanding of the interpreter who continually inhabits the liminal space of intercultural work.

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