

The History of a Wound: Women, War, and the Diary, 1854–2007

Joel Haefner

According to Hacking, trauma, which had always meant a physical or physiological wound, acquired a new meaning sometime between 1874 and 1886 in France when it came to designate a spiritual, psychic, or mental injury, what he calls a “wound to the soul.” Trauma acquired this additional sense of wounding by being linked to memory, such that trauma’s wound no longer injured only the body but the soul and, through it, memory itself.

—Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*

“We are going to carve revenge on your back,” my father said. “We’ll write out oaths and names. Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice,” my mother said. “And you’ll never forget either.” My father first brushed the

words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting; to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems, large blades. My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly—the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot—pain so various. . . . The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay me, the light would shine through my skin like lace.

—Maxine Hong Kingston,
The Woman Warrior

Early in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston tells the tale of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior. Actually, the narrative is much more complicated than that summary might suggest: the narrator tells of her mother's telling of Fa Mu Lan's life story, itself a tale of a tale carved into Fa Mu Lan's back. The family autobiography is imprinted on a wound, *is* a wound, and each layer in this intricately carved narrative is an irrupted wound: interposed between the narrator and the reader, between Fa Mu Lan and her parents, between Fa Mu Lan and her inscribed body, between the wounding and the telling of the wound. And behind it all are war, the woman warrior, and her story.

A wound, in its broadest sense, has many layers to it. Of course there is the actual reality of a war wound, a physical rending. But the wounds of war aren't limited to the body: representation itself is wounded; the genre which struggles to convey the wound is disrupted; the subjectivity of the speaker is changed and somehow broken; the expectations and paradigms of the reader are fractured. Variations of these themes are manifest in diverse texts, I suggest, even as we examine life narratives from different wars, from different writers, in different genres. The diary of Marianne Harriet Bucknall Estcourt, for example, chronicles in an unpublished diary the suffering of the Crimean War and eulogizes the career of her brother, James, who died of cholera in 1855, through newspaper clippings and drawings. Enid Bagnold's published extract from her personal diaries, *A Diary without Dates* (1978), details

her work as a nurse in an English hospital during World War I. Riverbend, a young Iraqi woman living in Baghdad, delivers an insider's view of the ridiculousness and stupidity of politics, and of the personal/familial cost of the war. Each of these writers, in some ways, faces the same question:

How do you treat a wound?

First Triage: Representing the Wound

A huge gap exists between the experience of a traumatic life-event, which disrupts the usual fabric of quotidian life, and the reporting of it in a daily text of some sort. The physical effects of war alone cannot be translated into a text with anything resembling verisimilitude: the smell of a concentration camp during the Holocaust; the haze of cannon fire in the valley of Balaclava during the Crimean War; the sudden terror of an unexpected explosion in the neighborhoods of Baghdad; the biting damp of the trenches during World War I—none of these experiences can be adequately translated into a text. A text attempting to describe war is always a failure, and the writer always undertakes a task that will implicitly fail. That failure has many roots: the events may be so horrific that they stun writers and survivors and readers into silence; the writer may be reporting someone else's experience; or time may have blurred the focus of those events. But the writer, and the text, continue to make the effort to represent the traumas of war and genocide, to “construct forms of witnessing through the necessary negotiation of the ‘unknowability’ inherent in such experiences,” as Anne Cubilié (2005) writes (11).

Marianne Estcourt negotiates this unknowability by balancing the general with the personal, information provided by newspapers, word of mouth, and military communiqués with her own personal experience. “Day of great anxiety,” she writes in 1854, “Cap. [Barlase?] sent us a message at 8 oclck to say that a French Steamer had come in with news, a great battle had been fought at R^r Alma on the 20th” (23 Sept.). The next day, a letter from Lady Stratford details how Russian forces outnumbered the allies and cannon volleys dissected the Light Brigade. Estcourt adds, “Sir W Young is killed, poor fellow, we saw him at Pera, so young, just three weeks married when he had to part from his wife [. . .].” Reportage, or at least the most general information available, contends with a very personal perspective. The statistical contends with the emotional. At one point (Friday, 9 Feb. 1855), she lists medical supplies sent from the

Purveyor's office in Balaclava; on another occasion (Wednesday, 2 May 1855), she details the number of nurses and patients. But there are many personal representations as well. On Wednesday, 6 June 1855, Estcourt writes, "we all 5 dined together almost as peacefully as former days, only there was the horrible sounds, & the thought that each sound brought death. Oh! my God, incline our hearts to Peace."

Explosions rip apart Riverbend's daily life in Baghdad as well, which in her Baghdad neighborhood becomes so mangled that even the blasts become routine:

The last few days, Baghdad has been echoing with explosions. We woke up to several loud blasts a few days ago. The sound has become all too common. It's like the heat, the flies, the carcasses of buildings, the broken streets and the haphazard walls coming up out of nowhere all over the city [. . .] it has become a part of life. We were sleeping on the roof around three days ago, but I had stumbled back indoors around 5 am when the electricity returned and was asleep under the cool air of an air-conditioner when the first explosions rang out. I tried futilely to cling to the last fragments of a fading dream and go back to sleep when several more explosions followed.

(2005, 283)

But for Riverbend, this very personal experience has to be translated, or put in the context of the whole nation and the entire Iraqi war, and the only way she and her family can do so is to watch television. Her brother immediately turns to the tube after these explosions and says in disgust, "We're not going to know what's happening until noon" (2005, 283). The news comes soon enough: there is a running battle on Haifa Street between armed Iraqis and Americans. The national has to be translated into the familial; the personal has to be translated into the global. Riverbend's blog is replete with documentation, news reports, links to other sites that give mainstream information, and those that provide dissident points of view, such as cnn.com, back-to-iraq.com, juancole.com, aljazeera.net, and washingtonpost.com.

Riverbend's situation, in fact the situation for any Iraqi civilian, makes it impossible for her to separate reports from outside sources from her own experiences. In November of 2005, American forces dropped

white phosphorus bombs on Fallujah. A video of the aftermath is posted on the Internet, and Riverbend internalizes its images as if she had experienced them herself:

Watching it [the video of the attack on Fallujah] was almost an invasive experience, because I felt like someone had crawled into my mind and brought my nightmares to life. Image after image of men, women and children so burnt and scarred that the only way you could tell the males apart from the females, and the children apart from the adults, was by the clothes they are wearing [. . .] the clothes which were eerily intact—like each corpse had been burnt to the bone, and then dressed up lovingly in their everyday attire—the polka-dot nightgown with a lace collar [. . .] the baby girl in her cotton pajamas—little earrings dangling from little ears.

(2006, 139)

The public genocide invades the personal. The everyday is wounded by the violence, torn asunder, scarred.

While the Blogger.com interface Riverbend uses for her blog makes the interpolation of such general and polemic sources easy and transparent, Estcourt used the same technique 150 years earlier. Her Crimean war diary includes the diarist's sketches of battlefields, long quotations from letters received from friends and family members, newspaper clippings, poems, prayers, and notes from sermons (Huff 1985, 34–36). Estcourt includes sketches of the battlefield of Balaclava with a single prose description copied from a letter received; the sketches complement and “validate” the reported eyewitness accounts (Saturday, 24 Sept. 1854). Estcourt's inclusion of all these extra-textual materials, Cynthia Huff claims, not only “give[s] credence and verification to the very personal and familial record,” but also places her as “part of the body politic by acting as its self-appointed chronicler”; the context of her journal is simultaneously familial and cultural (2000, 517, 519). As we readers re-imagine and reconstruct a life from these artifacts, we need to pay particular attention to these “material constituents of the lives under construction,” according to Susanna Egan (1999, 17) because such artifacts are as much part of the representation of a life as words are.

Between the representation of war and its wounds through reportage/statistics/“facts” on one hand, and representation through

lived experience and pathos on the other, there is a black hole of silence. Leigh Gilmore notes that “When self-representation entails the representation of trauma, the autobiographical paradox of representativeness is intensified. [. . .] How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth when facts, truth, and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?” (2001, 19). At such moments, traumatic events overwhelm both the “objective” and the “subjective.” Current trauma theory suggests that “the traumatic experience is cut off from other parts of the self, resulting in a dissociative state [. . .]” (Hawkins 2007, 119). Similarly, psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1992) talks about the “black hole” of silence which envelopes the representation of trauma. The text, the writer, and the reader cannot deal with the experience, cannot translate it. A “concentration camp” like Auschwitz, Laub writes, absorbs life, death and memory into a discursive and psychological black hole. “The impossibility of speaking and, in fact of listening, otherwise than through this silence, otherwise than through this black hole both of knowledge and of words, corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and forgetting, otherwise than through the genocide, otherwise than through this ‘hole of memory’” (65).

Estcourt, for example, records the death of one patient:

W. Lawless spoke of the want of nurses in the Gen. Hospital, one poor man who had not been touched for 4 days, he got a sponge to clean his mouth which was full of blood, he was calling out very angry & very distress at the way he was neglected, of course he could not bear any reading or comfort—W.L. procured him a nurse, the next day he was clean, quiet & “looking upon me as a minister of good,” I knelt down by his bedside & prayed with him, the next day he was dead [. . .]

(1 January 1855)

A space follows this in the otherwise cramped manuscript, creating a silence where the text or the narrator cannot follow. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (2002) write about Holocaust memoirs and diaries:

the reader might imagine she has gained direct access to those extreme death-bearing sites and everyday scenes of violence. But that would be to miss the gap that always

separates language from reference as does the space between a train and the platform, to invoke a haunting Holocaust image. Like the traveler, the reader on the heels of the writer's experience must always be wary of the space that makes the journeying possible in the first place—lest we stumble, which of course we must.

(8)

Like external, "objective" references (newspaper clippings and statistics, for example) and subjective evocations (images and music, for example), language fails at these points. In a sense, language here becomes wounded itself, split into silence between mimesis and subjectivity.

At several points in Bagnold's *Diary without Dates*, the diarist cannot unpack the meaning behind a phrase, a gesture, a place, or even her own actions—such as futilely wiping sweat from the brow of a man in extreme agony. The trauma is sometimes so great that the reader is only left with an imagining of the pain:

I went into a soldiers' ward to-night to inquire about a man who has pneumonia.

Round his bed there stood three red screens, and the busy, white-capped heads of two Sisters bobbed above the rampart. [. . .]

I went cold and stood rooted, waiting till one of them could come out and speak to me. [. . .]

The man I was to inquire for has no nostrils; they were blown away, and he breathes through two pieces of red rubber tubing: it gave a more horrible look to his face than I have ever seen.

The Sister came out and told me she thought he was "not up to much." I think she means he is dying.

I wonder if he thinks it better to die [. . .] But he was nearly well before he got pneumonia, had begun to take up the little habits of living. He had been out to tea.

Inexplicable, what he thinks of, lying behind the screen.

(7)

Bagnold's representation of the soldier's wounds imbricates all the modes of representing the patient's wound: the straightforward, realistic description of the man's nose and the recounting of dialogue; the subjective portrayal of the narrator's paralysis; and her flat admission that it is impossible to know the soldier's thoughts, that his experience is inexplicable. The juxtaposition of the ordinary with the severity of the man's wounds may create what Michael Rothberg (2000) calls "traumatic realism" (55 ff.), but just beyond that mode of representation, lurking in the lines between paragraphs and sentences, hiding behind the red hospital screens, is silence. Kate Douglas, Gillian Whitlock, and Bettina Stumm (2008) note that "the Greek root of trauma is 'wound,' and the experience of trauma is an overwhelming and self-shattering event that is frequently theorised as unspeakable, resistant to representation" (1).

The negotiation between these three discursive modes—referential language, emotive discourse, and silence—may comprise what Dominick LaCapra, citing Barthes, calls the "middle voice" of writing histories of trauma. The middle voice addresses the problematic of "one's relation as speaker to one's discourse in the present in contradistinction to one's account of a past discourse or phenomenon" (1998, 20). Or, to put it another way, the self-referential contends with the referential and with silence. In Bagnold's passage above, the "middle voice" manages to speak the self-referential ("I went cold and stood rooted"), the referential ("He had been out to tea"), and the speaker's unknowability ("Inexplicable, what he thinks of, lying behind the screen."). The truth of the soldier's wound is not simply reportage; it is evocation and a vacuum as well.

Second Triage: Wounded Genre

When it was published by the Feminist Press in 2005, Riverbend's blog received the Lettre Ulysses Award for Literary Reportage, and the award points out perfectly the interpolations and disruptions posed by the daily "eyewitness" representation of war in her blog as well as in Estcourt's manuscript diary. Are daily lifewritings from war zones literature or journalism? Subjective personal accounts or reportage? Truth or lies? Nancy K. Miller (2007) notes that while the question of the "truthfulness" of autobiographical writing is very important to most readers, "autobiographers don't really care" (541), and the fact is you can't really determine if a blog like Riverbend's is factual or not. "How can you tell for sure that the autobiographer isn't lying?" Miller asks. "You can't, or maybe you can to some degree, on small (or not so small) verifiable items [. . .]."

(539).¹ Dori Laub points out that testimony about traumatic events should not be read for veracity, as historians might of an Auschwitz survivor's account of an inmate rebellion. What matters in such testimonies, Laub asserts, is not facts, but human actions and the construction of human knowledge and subjectivities: the Auschwitz survivor "was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination. The historians could not hear, I thought, the way in which her silence was itself part of her testimony, an essential part of the historical truth she was precisely bearing witness to" (62).

The cultural expectations of any genre shape the texts that instantiate it and the parameters that define and limit it, of course, but this fact seems particularly true of autobiography in general and daily lifewriting like diaries, journals, and blogs in particular. Referentiality and truthfulness are absolute conditions for many twenty-first-century readers, as Nancy K. Miller's account of the sense of betrayal surrounding James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* reveals (538–39)—and many lifewritings have been accused of being fraudulent, including, notably, Rigoberta Menchú's memoir. Accounts of traumatic events, like war, only heighten readers' expectations of verifiable referentiality, perhaps because we suspect there will be other reports on the events, perhaps because focusing on the validity of putative "facts" allows us to turn away from the experiential reality of war, suffering, and wounding to focus exclusively on historical truth (see Laub). As Stephen Owen points out in a recent article, the most adequate theory about genre is that "genre sets" are historically constructed and "socially determined venues of textual production that form families" (2007, 1391)—and if that is true, then our current cultural moment may place particular value on the referential dimension, the "truthfulness" of lifewriting.²

Given these cultural expectations—that daily lifewriting should be factual, truthful, verifiable from outside sources—it should not be surprising that autobiographical war writing by women is disrupted, irrupted, interrupted—a wounded genre. In such writing, readers'/viewers'/listeners' expectations are ignored or inverted by the text. The texts of Estcourt, Bagnold, and Riverbend, as do other texts focusing on war and its effects, interrogate readers' expectations as well as writers' intentions and performative acts in ways that, in Leigh Gilmore's formulation, test the limits of autobiography.³

The unmarried daughter of a doctor and landowner in Gloucestershire, Marianne Estcourt (1814–1885) clearly considered herself the

keeper of the family record and the panegyrist of her brother James's life and achievements (Huff 1985, 34–36). In her role as chronicler and helpmeet to her brother, she and her sister-in-law Caroline traveled to Canada when James was assigned there, and later to the Crimea when he played a leading role in the Crimean War. The purpose of her diary (which like most diaries is not consistently daily) is to provide a record for other family members, as she says explicitly early in the text; the exclusive audience is the extended Estcourt family and subsequent generations. After her death it took its place within a larger collection of family documents. Her account of James's death from cholera was likely re-read and read aloud by the family on the anniversary of his death, as was common for many Victorian diarists, as Huff has pointed out (1985, xviii). As the self-acknowledged family chronicler, she was expected to provide a meaningful and detailed account:

Dr. S. gave him Opium, but the sickness continued very violently & when we found him at 10^{1/2} his voice was very much altered, weak & hollow [. . .]. We laid him down on his bed & presently he got cooler, cooler, cooler, till the clammy cold of cholera came on, his skin hard, & whilst he fancied himself burning hot, he was cold as ice [. . .]. As soon as he was laid down & made [. . .] comfortable [. . .] he kissed us so touchingly holding Caro[line] in his arms, with such a look of quiet peace & love. [. . .] [W]hen he swallowed I saw it was with difficulty, & his teeth were closed. his eyes were altering, he was evidently sinking, about 11^{1/2} he sprang up in bed had a sort of dreadful convulsion his jaw rigid, & his eyes—no words can describe this. [. . .] [A]t 5 min to 9 the pulse ceased to beat, the eyes had long been fixed & Caro[line] & I closed them, those beautiful eyes, we closed them & his mouth, that darling mouth—we laid him down to rest in the full assurance that his spirit was gone to God.

(Wednesday, 6 June 1855)

The account balances specific detail, almost clinical at times, with evocations of love and pity delivered in part through artful anaphora. As death approaches, her brother becomes increasingly objectified—"the pulse," "the eyes"—probably as a way for Estcourt to cope with his death. While two voices contend in this passage—the objective and the emotive—

another discursive mode emerges: “no words can describe this.” The experience of witnessing her brother’s suffering overwhelms the diarist, and only through silence can the full impact of the event be conveyed, a silence in which Estcourt family members (and now we modern readers) are expected to participate. In fact, Marianne Estcourt ends this diary, which is also her final extant diary, with one last entry three weeks after she recorded James’s death: “here we leave whatever we loved so dearly in this most miserable country” (Wednesday, 27 June 1855).

That act of renunciation is the final irruption of the family record Estcourt has fashioned. The motivation for this piece of lifewriting has terminated: she has chosen to end her act of memorialization with James’s death. And, of course, his death is so traumatic for Marianne Estcourt and for the family mythology that closure and silence is perhaps the only possible response.

While Marianne Estcourt’s manuscript diary was written for herself and her family, Enid Bagnold’s *A Diary without Dates* was clearly intended for a wider, literary audience. Bagnold sent excerpts from her journal, based on her experiences as a V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse at a London hospital in 1914–15, to a would-be lover, Antoine Bibesco, bound with watercolors and titled *Reflections of a V.A.D.* Bibesco, who fashioned himself Bagnold’s mentor, not lover, urged her to send the manuscript to William Heinemann for publication (Sebba, 57–58). The dedication of Bagnold’s *Autobiography* reads, “To that friend of mine who, when I wrote him endless letters, said coldly, ‘Why not keep something for yourself?’ [. . .] What he [Antoine] meant was that I should make a book of it; and that is what I did” (1969, 169).

While ostensibly the diary grew out of Bagnold’s desire to write for this one man, it became important in her larger scheme to gain literary fame—which, of course, she ultimately achieved not only with her plays but also, and chiefly, with her novel *National Velvet*. The manuscript diary was passed to the writer and critic Desmond MacCarthy, who promptly lost it on a bus; Bagnold luckily had another copy. With the success of her volume and MacCarthy’s intervention with the Heinemann publishing firm, she did gain entry to the English literati—though not to the Bloomsbury group: Virginia Woolf peevishly refused to review it in the *Times* (Sebba 1986, 60–61). Publication of *A Diary without Dates* had two immediate consequences for Bagnold: she got sacked from the hospital, and she achieved a modicum of literary fame from a widely read article in the *Daily Mail* (Bagnold 1969, 170). A

sketch in Bagnold's *Autobiography* (1969) captioned "My daydream on publication day of *A Diary without Dates*" shows a line of customers stretching for blocks from the entrance to Hatchard's Book Shop (171).

Bagnold achieved her goal of procuring literary fame partly by reshaping the diary genre. To begin with, as the title states, she stripped away one of the core elements of the diary: its reference to actual days. Without dates, the sequential nature of diaries vanishes, and with it their claim to historical veracity, the sense that the text parallels the temporal flow of a life, and the implication, as well, that there may be some teleological dimension to the text, that it will end in death or some significant life event. Instead, Bagnold's diary is structured metaphorically. Divided into three sections titled "Outside the Glass Doors," "Inside the Glass Doors," and "The Boys . . ." the journal's focus changes as the volume progresses from the general (Bagnold's reflections on the institution of the hospital) to the more specific (her experiences in the ward, her vignettes about specific patients). Through metaphor, dialogue, carefully crafted short sentences, and apt diction, Bagnold creates a literary effect:

Wounded at Mons, he [Gayner] was brought home to England, and since then he has made the round of the hospitals. He is a good-looking, sullen man who will not read or write or sew, who will not play draughts or cards or speak to his neighbour. He sits up, attentive, while the ulcers on his leg are being dressed, but if one asks him something of the history of his wound his tone holds such a volume of bitterness and exasperation that one feels that at any moment the locks of his spirit might cease to hold.

(1978, 95)

The literary qualities of Bagnold's diary emphasize the disruptions and silences created by the wounds of war; the genre of the diary is irrupted, wounded, by the intervention of the novelistic. As Egan suggests, such a "mixing" of genres introduces a new sign system, one that alters the diaristic discourse of fact and feeling with ambiguity, metaphor, connectiveness, and silence. Bagnold's text seeks to inscribe the biography of the history of wounds; the wounds themselves become characters in her diary: "'Tisn' no more me arm," says the amputee Rees at one point, "'Tisn' me arm, it's me wound" (1978, 115). The patients,

like Waker, recall the anniversary of their wounds, “the exact hour and minute on which their bit of metal turned them for home” (1978, 121). In the end, however, the narrator of Bagnold’s *A Diary without Dates* fails to really comprehend or bear witness to the soldiers’ pain and their wounds. “I don’t yet understand the importance they attach to such an anniversary,” she writes; the men expect her to “share some sacrament with them,” but it is obvious that she cannot (1978, 121).

The familial, memorial diary of Marianne Estcourt becomes, in Bagnold’s hands, a dateless, novel-like text that acknowledges its own failures to record; under Riverbend’s cursor, the diary genre is transformed by technology and context into a very different kind of diurnal lifewriting. In Riverbend’s blog, the symbolic system of the I-witnessing diary intersects with the symbolic systems of the blogosphere. In *Baghdad Burning*, generic expectations are interrupted in many ways: comments by and to email correspondents, links to external websites and documents, contextual commentary, hyperlinks to archived blog entries, and videos. The generic expectations of blogs are currently formative and very dynamic, as programmers change and elaborate the interfaces that define blogs. Blogs, as they evolve, are hybrids of such genres as diaries, reportage, logs, even photo albums and music collections, and as a result, create new generic expectations. “Genre is the discourse of total order,” writes Stephen Owen (2007), “where everything has its place; hybridity is a secondary formation that reinscribes established criteria of difference. Only history reminds us how contingent any particular identification actually is” (1393). In what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call “remediation,” some elements of diaries and journals persist in blogs: dailiness, referentiality or “truthfulness,” and the expectation of a specific narrative voice.⁴ But there are new elements too: the assumption of a global audience, audience interactivity, persistence and open revision, and the opportunity for blogger and reader to polemicize, to name a few. Gillian Whitlock’s brilliant analysis of the intersection of self, language, testimony, audience and blog technology in the Baghdad Blogger’s text sheds considerable light on Riverbend’s record as well: blogs have “features uniquely designed to facilitate the [...] ideological work of cross-cultural engagement and eyewitnessing”; blogs present “a direct and sometimes bracing interaction and engagement with readers [...] [a] process of testing and questioning authenticity and truth [...]” (2007, 37).

As Riverbend unfolds her chronicle of trials, deaths, and woundings in Baghdad from 2003 to 2007, two irruptions clearly dominate:

contextual commentary and audience interaction. *Baghdad Burning* is a highly historicized text; the narrator Riverbend and her text are case studies in transculturation. The suffering of Iraqis cannot be understood, Riverbend implies, without understanding the rent in the fabric of Iraqi social and religious life that the 2003 American invasion imposed. And partly her intent is to educate:

Encroaching Western values and beliefs have also played a prominent role in pushing Iraqis to embrace Islam. Just as there are ignorant people in the Western world (and there are plenty—I have the emails to prove it—don't make me embarrass you), there are ignorant people in the Middle East. In Muslims and Arabs, Westerners see suicide bombers, terrorists, ignorance, and camels. In Americans, Brits, etc., some Iraqis see depravity, prostitution, ignorance, domination, junkies, and ruthlessness.

(2005, 19–20)

She wants, in part, to bridge the gap between cultures, as suggested by her epigraph: “I’ll meet you ’round the bend my friend, where hearts can heal and souls can mend” (2005, 5). Part of her mission is to explain Iraqi society, including the celebrations of Ramadan and Eid, the role of women in Iraqi society, the functions and structure of sheikhs and tribes, and the difference between the hijab and abaya. When Riverbend addresses these points in her blog, her imagined audience is clearly Westerners, but at other points, she delivers news and opinion to other Iraqis and Arabs—for example, her entry of 8 September 2003, details the death of an Iraqi lawyer and neighbor (see Cooke 2007, 24). The rupture between Middle Eastern and Western cultures is instantiated in her blog by both Riverbend’s explanatory entries and her links to other sites. That rupture becomes even more apparent in the transition from blog to book. The Feminist Press editions of Riverbend’s blog include historical and political background sections by James Ridgeway; links to external sites are placed in boxes, often running over several pages. For instance, between 8 January and 20 January 2004, Riverbend provides links to opinions posted by the Baghdad Blogger, a western reporter’s interview with a female Iraqi minister, an article from the *Washington Post*, and the website of Iraqi cleric Al-Sistani (2005, 182–95). Iraqi voices are intermingled with western voices; social criticism is interspersed with

social didacticism. Because (as Riverbend explained in her first entry) she wanted her blog to be in part a “rantlog,” there are also numerous interruptions with links to external adversary sites, such as ones with a satiric “letter” from George W. Bush; diatribes from bloggers mykeru, Juan Cole, and TomDispatch; appeals from Physicians for Human Rights; a blog by an American soldier; and the *Onion*, to name a few.

The other interruption in the blog is Riverbend’s responses to her readers. At times she is astounded, for example, at the volume of congratulatory emails she received when the blog is nominated for the prestigious British Samuel Johnson award (Riverbend, “Baghdad Burning”). Often she finds herself in an adversarial relationship with some of her readers—as, for example, when another blogger creates a mock “Baghdad Burning” blog: “No, I do not have Multiple Personality Disorder,” she informs her visitors (2005, 118–20). Riverbend defines her own subjectivity in the context of the responses of her readers, trying to maintain some privacy even as she puts her life on global display:

A lot of you have been asking about my background and the reason why my English is good. I am Iraqi—born in Iraq to Iraqi parents, but was raised abroad for several years as a child [. . .] I am bilingual [. . .]. As to my connection with Western culture [. . .] you wouldn’t believe how many young Iraqi people know so much about American/British/French pop culture [. . .]. But no matter what—I shall remain anonymous. I wouldn’t feel free to write otherwise [. . .]. You know me as Riverbend, you share a very small part of my daily reality—I hope that will suffice.”

(2005, 21)

In another entry she declares, “I don’t hate Americans, contrary to what many people seem to believe.” She goes on to say that she hates American troops on some specific occasions, but feels pity watching hot, confused, frightened troops: “Mixed feelings in a messed up world” (2005, 13).

The gaps—between Riverbend and her readers, between American and Iraqi cultures, between the West and the Middle East, between her “daily reality” and the larger arena of the Iraqi war, between the society she knew in the past and the chaos that persists today—rend and fracture her blog. The dialogic nature of autobiography that Egan describes in

Mirror Talk—the “dynamic and reciprocal relations between text and context” and “the contestatory nature of many of [the] relationships” between self and other (23)—dominate Riverbend’s blog and necessarily, given the violence and fear surrounding her, tear the text apart.

Third Triage: Witnessing the Wound

If a gap exists between Riverbend and her readers that fragments her blog, it is nevertheless a necessary schism. Obviously, any kind of writing, even the most private, assumes some reader, but it is particularly true in writing about war or other traumatic events that the event will not be acknowledged, will not be confirmed, will not be real until someone other than the writer witnesses it. Dori Laub points out that “The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to [. . .]. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). Although there is a strong impetus to fall silent in the face of traumatic events, and an “impossibility of telling,” there is an equally strong imperative to tell the truth, to testify about the realities of inhuman acts, a point Gilmore makes by emphasizing the “judiciary” element in life writing about trauma (7).

But how can anyone adequately treat a wound in a text? “However vivid and gripping the account,” asserts Lynne Hanley, “a reader’s experience of war will never include one of war’s most definitive emotions: the immediate and entirely legitimate fear of losing one’s life, limbs, or senses, or of seeing the person next to one lose his” (1991, 5). The reader’s body is always absent from war and trauma; words fail, and sympathy and empathy fail as well. In *A Diary without Dates*, when the nurses change the dressing packed into five enormous wounds in Waker’s body, the narrator—and the reader—can only look on in shock:

I did not dare touch his hand with that too-easy compassion which I have noticed here, or whisper to him, “It’s nearly over...” as the forceps pulled at the stiffened gauze. It wasn’t nearly over.

Six inches deep the gauze stuck, crackling under the pull of the forceps, blood and pus leaping forward from the cavities as the steady hand of the doctor pulled inch

after inch of the gauze to the light. And when one hole
was emptied there was another, five in all.

(1978, 123)

This act of witnessing, in Santanu Das's words, "lurch[es] between the twin acts of reaching out and looking away: there is at once a connection and a cut in the imagining?" (2005, 253). Witnessing the wound and the wounded causes a rupture between reader and writer.

Bagnold's *Diary without Dates* reflects another temporal step removed from the experiences of war: from the moment of the men's actual wounding to her encounter with them in the hospital to her inscription in her diary to her revisions for publication. The remembering, and hence the memorialization of the actuality of war, is what I call "imbricated memory": layers of recollection and re-presentation that accumulate in the aftermath of trauma, like the rings of a tree.

Estcourt and Bagnold are displaced witnesses, that is, witnesses to others who suffer the bodily wounds. Estcourt witnesses the deaths of her brother and his fellow officers and soldiers; Bagnold witnesses the aftermath of trauma, the final chapters of the history of their wounds. Bagnold at least recognizes that making and uncovering the soldiers' stories is her role as a witness: "They know so little about each other, and they don't ask. It is only I who wonder—I, a woman, and therefore of the old, burnt-out world. These men watch without curiosity, speak no personalities, form no sets, express no likings, analyse nothing" (1978, 56). The displacement of Estcourt and Bagnold as observers and writers was conditioned by gender restrictions: women were not allowed into combat, but women staffed the hospitals and protected as well as maintained the home front in the soldiers' absence.

As Douglas, Whitlock, and Stumm note, "The events of 9/11 authorise new subjects of trauma narrative" (3), and so we discover new subjectivities and new modes of witnessing in Riverbend's blog. Riverbend still finds gender restrictions in twenty-first-century wartime; moreover, her movement is circumscribed by social and familial rules, and she frequently notes that the men in her family have more freedom of movement than she does. In March 2004 she writes that it takes four days to get parental permission to leave the house to make a purchase, including "locating a free male relative with some extra time on his hands to join me in the adventure" (2005, 229). But Riverbend inserts herself, and is forced into, the heart of the conflict as well as the enormous disconnect between

American force and policy and their effect on the daily lives of Iraqis. Like the blogger Pax analyzed by Gillian Whitlock, Riverbend creates a virtual self as a new kind of “soft weapon”; she is embedded—and embeds herself—in the heart of the conflict in transformative ways that invert the American idea of “embedding.” (2007, 31–36). She is an intentional witness without institutional approval.

Gender provides one layer to the imbricated memory of the wound; the mode of production provides another, which changes from manuscript to published book to blog (and published book) in the three texts under consideration here. Familial politics affected Estcourt’s manuscript: What should be saved? Should anything be excised? Should this manuscript be included in a family collection? Literary politics affected Bagnold’s book: Who knows who in the publishing world? Who is the current “lionette” (a phrase given to Bagnold by her mentor)? Who will or will not review the book? What will sell? And global politics affected Riverbend’s blog: How to counter mainstream American media? How to get and exchange information? How to speak to a hostile or alien audience? Will the electricity be on to post entries? Gilmore argues that lifewriting about trauma is subject to what Ian Hacking calls “memoropolitics,” the vectors and constraints affecting “persons and their actions operating, as Foucault theorized, in a field of power” (24–25). What is not said, what falls into the black hole of silence is subject to these constraints on the life writer.

And the reader clearly has a role in this dynamic as well. As a memorial of her dead brother, Marianne Estcourt’s diary must include the evidence and evocations that magnify him. Bagnold knew her audience well, too: the literati of London, who opposed the war. She writes ironically to them at the end of her book “We must win the war, win the war, win the war! [. . .] Every sort of price must be paid, every kind of curious coinage—the pennies and farthings of fear and despair in odd places, as well as the golden coin of life which is spent across the water” (1978, 126–27). And Riverbend is continually correcting the collective memory of Americans about WMDs (weapons of mass destruction); the cause and outcome of the first Gulf War; and the reasons, goals, and consequences of the current Iraqi War. Rosalia Baena (2005) argues that autobiography is “a way of reading that actually emphasizes the agency of the reader” in finding new ways to make knowledge (213). Riverbend thanks, upbraids, and instructs her readers as they flood her with emails: “You really don’t have to read my blog if

you don't want to and you certainly don't have to email me telling me how much you hate it. It's great to get questions and differing opinions—but please be intelligent about it, and above all, creative—if I want to hear what Fox News has to say, I'll watch it" (2005, 10).

Whatever the relationship between the reader and the writer in lifewriting about trauma, the reader is absolutely central to the representation of trauma, war, and wounding. However much impinges on the writer's memory of trauma and its representation, however broken and wounded memory is, the text—the representation of war, genocide and violence—demands a witness, in fact, demands the witness of a witnessing. That is the role of the reader, a role played more intimately in daily life writing like diaries and blogs than in other lifewriting about wartime trauma. The distance between the record and the event seems smaller, the time shorter, the memory less contaminated—or at least that is our expectation and a clause in the implicit contract the writer has made with her audience. The text seems more "truthful" to us, the testimony more legitimate or, to return to Gilmore's metaphor, more admissible because there is less temporal distance between event and its inscription in daily life writing than in other kinds. And hence the "the space that connects the text and the reader," as Nancy K. Miller phrases it, is closer (540).

Last Triage: Memorializing the Wound

On 15 February 2004, Riverbend memorializes the thirteenth anniversary of the Amiriyah Shelter massacre. During one of the heaviest bombings of the Gulf War, which occurred during the celebration of Eid Al-Fitr in the Al-A'amiriya neighborhood of Baghdad, over 400 women, children, and men crowded into the well-equipped shelter. "I can imagine the scene after the men left at around midnight [to give women privacy]—women sat around, pouring out steaming *istikans* of tea, passing out Eid *kilaycha* and chocolate. Kids would run around the shelter shrieking and laughing [. . .]. Teenage girls would sit around gossiping about guys or clothes or music [. . .]" (2005, 208). At 4 a.m. an American smart bomb drilled into the shelter, followed quickly by another. The bombs turned the shelter into an inferno. So intense was the heat that the bodies of some of the victims were etched into the concrete walls.

During her visit to the shelter after the bombing, Riverbend encounters the "caretaker" of the site, a woman who left the shelter just

before the bombs fell to get a change of clothes for her toddler. She lost eight of her nine children in the bombing.

When she ran back to the shelter from her house across the street, she found it had been struck and the horror had begun. She had watched the corpses dragged out for days and days and refused to believe they were all gone for months after. She hadn't left the shelter since—it had become her home.

She pointed to the vague ghosts of bodies stuck to the concrete on the walls and ground and the worst one 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.

(2005, 211–12)

Riverbend's matter-of-fact prose has to collapse, finally, into silence: the violence of the Amiriyah slaughter is unspeakable. But even more importantly, the wound to Iraqi society and Iraqi memory is unimaginable. The long account in Riverbend's blog irrupts into her record concluding with a rebuttal to those of her readers who might try to justify the bombing. Like the readers of the *Woman Warrior's* scars, we stand several steps back from the tragedy, through narrative layers, through wounded, imbricated memory. But in the end the distance seems small indeed, and we can almost touch the scars, the ghosts on the wall.

Notes

1. In his 1979 essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement," Paul de Man took up some of the same issues that Nancy K. Miller addressed in her 2007 PMLA article, specifically the question of the value of the referentiality/truthfulness of the autobiography or memoir. In that essay de Man labeled the gap between the subject's "reality" and its narrative representation as defacement. But de Man's approach has two flaws: it assumes an intentionality by the writer to misspeak and mislead, and by focusing on the singularity of the writer/narrator, it belittles the broadest context and global effects that war writing and testimony about trauma inherently engages.

2. Tracking the changes between Estcourt's diary of 1855 and Riverbend's blog from 2003–7 establishes a genealogy of the form of daily lifewriting that avoids assumptions about the "evolution" of the genre. Mark Poster (1999)

suggests in his work in new media studies that such an approach avoids teleological and evaluative “totalizing narratives” that distort our reconstruction of the genre.

3. Although I use the term “genre” throughout this essay, it is important to remember that, as numerous writers have pointed out, autobiographical “genre” is not a set of codified constraints upon texts or by which texts are judged, but a complex interplay between text, author, reader, critic, and context, as Marlene Kadar observed (1992, 9ff.).

4. Listing several modes by which new media may adapt/adopt old media, Bolter and Grusin (2000) write that “the new media can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized” (47). While an exploration of the historical changes from manuscript diary to blog is beyond the scope of this paper, such a genealogy, if conducted without a teleological premise, would begin to uncover the parameters of autobiographical discourse in blogs. See Poster (12) and Bolter and Grusin (21).

Works Cited

- Bagnold, Enid. 1969. *Enid Bagnold's Autobiography*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- . 1978. *A Diary without Dates*. London: Virago.
- Baena, Rosalia. 2005. “Transculturating Auto/biography: Forms of Life Writing.” Special issue. *Prose Studies* 27: 211–343.
- Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cooke, Miriam. 2007. “Baghdad Burning: Women Write War in Iraq.” *World Literature Today* 81: 23–26.
- Cubilié, Anne. 2005. *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*. New York: Fordham Univ. Press.
- Das, Santanu. 2005. “The Impotence of Sympathy: Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War.” *Textual Practice* 19: 239–62.
- de Man, Paul. 1984. “Autobiography as De-Facement.” In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Paul de Man, 67–82. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Douglas, Kate, Gillian Whitlock, and Bettina Stumm. 2008. “Editorial: Trauma in the Twenty-First Century.” *Life Writing* 5: 1–8.
- Egan, Susanna. 1999. *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press.

- Estcourt, Marianne Harriet Bucknall. Unpublished manuscript diary. Gloucester, England, Record Office, D1571 F555-8.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Hanley, Lynne. 1991. *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press.
- Hawkins, Anne H. 2007. "Writing about Illness: Therapy? or Testimony?" In *Unfitting Stories: Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Trauma*, 113–127. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press.
- Huff, Cynthia. 1985. *British Women's Diaries: A Descriptive Bibliography of Selected Nineteenth-Century Women's Manuscript Diaries*. New York: AMS Press.
- . 2000. "Reading as Re-Vision: Approaches to Reading Manuscript Diaries." *Biography* 23: 504–23.
- Kadar, Marlene. 1992. "Coming to Terms: Life Writing—from Genre to Critical Practice." In *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar, 3–16. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1976. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 1998. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Laub, Dori. 1992. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening." In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 57–74. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, Nancy K. 2007. "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." *PMLA* 122: 537–48.
- Miller, Nancy K., and Jason Tougaw. 2002. "Introduction: Extremities." In *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, 1–24. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press.
- Owen, Stephen. 2007. "Genres in Motion." *PMLA* 122: 1389–93.
- Poster, Mark. 1999. "Underdetermination." *New Media and Society* 1: 12–17.
- Riverbend. "Baghdad Burning." <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/> (accessed 24 February 2011).

- . 2005. *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. New York: Feminist Press.
- . 2006. *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Sebba, Anne. 1986. *Enid Bagnold: The Authorized Biography*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Whitlock, Gillian. 2007. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.