

Urban Warfare and Placings of Somatic Obligation in Jonathan Holmes' *Falluja*

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In "Walking in the City," Michel de Certeau distinguishes the concept city, the disciplining of urban space into rational units of mapability, from the urban fact, the anarchic, mobile and operational actuality of existence in urban space. Strategists impose order onto urban space by creating structures of transportation, zoning ordinances, infrastructural governance and amenities, sidewalks, bridges, parks, buildings and so on. Tacticians, the people who actually live in the city, constantly resist and undo this imposed order. As these pedestrians maneuver the city, the motion of their bodies map new cities, transforming, displacing and improvisationally connecting the signifiers of ordered space into migrational patterns of use.

The discourse of warfare seeks to conceptualize cities as military targets to be (re)ordered. Urban warfare, however, presents specific challenges to the strategies of organization that military operatives seek to enforce. The very geography of urban space, constructed in the tension between its strategists and tacticians, is a complex environment, requiring bodily negotiations, as opposed to the vehicular or technological management utilized in open spaces of conflict. Consequently, soldiers are obligated to engage in close, body to body combat. In essence, the strategists, those who would impose order, are transformed into tacticians, spatial practitioners, who move through a city/battlefield shaped by non-combatants, de Certeau's pedestrians. The intended targets of martial operations, as military historian Alice Hills points out, are "terrorists" or an opponent's "military capability" but "urban operations take place within, against and by means of civilians" (238).

Jonathan Holmes' *Falluja*, a documentary theatre piece constructed from first person testimony concerning the U.S. siege of the Iraqi city, attempts to re-materialize war by using live bodies to signify the shifting, tactical reality of the city and of urban warfare. The play requires a free-form, open performance space, bare except for a large projection screen and two small mobile television sets, and utilizes a sophisticated soundscape to create an auditory iconography of war. The staging area remains mobile; spectators stand and the action takes place among and

all around them. Using the live bodies of actors and spectators as indices of the city, the play mimetically makes and un-makes Falluja. The characters of the play as well as the play's individual spectators become de Certeau's walkers, alternately denying order or taking advantage of disorder. Concurrently, dead and injured bodies are perpetually referenced and described, documenting the corporeal reality of urban military operations. The spaces of the performance venue, the actual city and the mimetic action of the play make multiple meanings of the word "Falluja" and create, for both the spectator and the reader, a layered, visceral and conflicted experience of "place." Rather than presenting the siege as a political or diplomatic action, the staging of the play involves and implicates its audience in the material effects, and costs, of war.[1]

Documentary Theatre and Shifting Selves

The action of *Falluja* takes place primarily in Baghdad and Falluja in April and November 2004, and its characters include U.S. and British soldiers, Muhajedin, Iraqi civilians, and international aid workers and journalists. Each named and un-named character has a one-to-one correspondence to a real person, with the exception of Sasha, a British reporter, who is a composite of several real people, including Holmes himself. The play's texts and scenarios, compiled from eyewitness accounts, first person interviews, alternative and mainstream media sources, and public record, have been edited, arranged, and sutured into narrative episodes constructed by Holmes. Each "narrative episode" becomes a gestic signifier and takes on a "double appearance," revealing simultaneously two distinct signifieds: the reality of the original testimony and its abstraction into dramatic narrative (Pavis, 45).

Documentary, or as it is also called, verbatim, theatre often works to smooth over this doubling effect through its staging. Although documentary pieces always contain monologues addressed to the audience, an acknowledgement of the inherent compromise theatricality brings to authenticity, they still maintain the convention of a fourth wall in the separation of audience and performance space. In this way, verbatim theatre presents a literally and dramaturgically stable point of view, and "provides . . . a fixed reflection of self that ultimately affirms our values as human beings and confidence in the continuing existence of a rational, liberal world order" (Hughes, 256). *The Laramie Project*, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, and *Stuff Happens*, among other examples, all clearly delineate the illusionistic space of performance from the actual space

of spectatorship. The viewers, therefore, although they may be intellectually or emotionally moved, remain physically passive witnesses to the action before them.

Holmes eliminates any residue of a fourth wall by requiring that the action of the play take place “all around” and “among” the audience. Spectators remain standing and are obligated to physically move in order to accommodate different scenes. The perspective of the spectators literally changes from scene to scene and moment to moment as the stage boundaries are created and dissolved through the bodies of both performers and spectators. In act one, the demarcation between performance space and spectator space remains distinct, if mobile, and the presentation of the scenes are iconic, realistic representations of media briefings and dialogue.

By act two, the delineation between performance and audience space deteriorates and the bodies of spectators and actors converge and disperse unpredictably. When the action moves to Falluja, the separation collapses and the bodies on the stage, those of both actors and spectators, become indexes, and signifiers, of the city. In negotiating or imposing border zones of surveillance, violence, and resistance, the actors’ bodies map the city. Because of the established staging, the audience does the same, sometimes with aid workers and civilians, sometimes with the Mujahedin, and sometimes with the American soldiers. The meaning of the spectator’s “self” is, hence, propelled into constantly shifting motion. They are corporeally implicated in the action of the play, and like the bodies of the actors, becomes *gests*, inhabiting and embodying contradictory positions. “Instead of fusing logos and gestuality in an illusion of reality, the *Gestus*,” Pavis writes, “radically cleaves the performance into two blocks, the shown (the said) and the showing (the saying)” (45). The audience in *Falluja* are *shown* but are also involved in the showing.

The Concept City

Act one of *Falluja* begins with a press briefing in Baghdad, April 3, 2004. This staged scene is simultaneously projected on screen in a style that “mimics” CNN; the date and location are prominently displayed. Sasha, a British journalist, recounts the murder, in Falluja, of four “American civil contractors, working for Blackwater security” (Holmes, 160). A U.S. general describes the U.S. plan for retaliation:

We are not going to do a pell-mell rush into the city. It will be deliberate, it will be precise and it will be overwhelming. . . We will plan our way through this and we will re-establish

control of that city and we will pacify that city (161).

The “burned, mutilated and brutalized bodies” of the American contractors testifies to the urban fact, the anarchic tacticians, of Falluja (160). The U.S. military intends to re-order, or strategize, Falluja as a concept city, part of but specifically separate from, the general war on terror. The view of the general and the media is voyeuristic: they are seeing Falluja from outside its day to day existence, theorizing what it is and what it should be. The audience, during these first scenes, remains anchored outside the performance space, and, therefore, the city as well. The next scene re-enforces the outside-ness of the audience. Rana, an Iraqi aid worker, speaking directly to the audience, says that her job is to go *into* the “cities under siege” and try to bring the injured, women and children *out*.

Although Rana is outside the city in this moment, she alludes to its interiority. One of the conditions of urbanity, writes war sociologist Martin Shaw, is heterogeneity, a multi-vocal actuality of existence where different people and points of view co-exist (Shaw, 145, 148). In act one, the U.S. and British military construct Falluja as a “universal and anonymous subject,” lifted out of history to exist in a “nowhen” (Certeau, 94); that is, the present moment of its “violent and determined opposition” to America (Holmes, 161). Rana offers a different perspective:

The resistance started after the peaceful protest in May. The Americans shot about twenty people in the protest. . . Fallujah was the centre of the anti-Saddam coup in the nineties. Falluja did not resist to start with. People said ‘we were thinking the Americans came to help.’ I was thinking ‘they come to destroy Iraq’ (162).

Rana historicizes Falluja as a location of multiple subjectivities, and by offering a dialectical counter-narrative, she creates “an opacity of history” (Certeau, 94). The strategic view of those outside the city is thus complicated, their version of history is exposed as inaccurately simplistic, and Falluja, as a sign, is destabilized. Rana demonstrates pedestrian, street-level knowledge of the city. The only character, in act one, to speak directly to the audience without the mediation of a projected image of herself, she begins the process of transforming the spectators from observers of the city into practitioners of it.

The Urban Fact

Jo, a British aid worker: (. . . *walks on, one hand raised, the other holding a loudspeaker. With her is Rana.*) Rana: Jo, careful. . . Jo: Hold your fire! We're here to deliver medical supplies and a new ambulance. I'm English! The vehicle you will see is a new ambulance; it's safe! (*Bullets ricochet around them; they dart back to the wall and wait. The shooting stops.*) Jo: Stop shooting! I know you can hear me! We're meant to be on the same side, for Christ's sake! These supplies need to get through—people are dying! (*They edge out again. So far so good. They make it further out into the open before the shooting starts again; heavier than before. They dart back again*) (Holmes, 169-170).

Between acts one and two, there is no transition indicated. The scene above, scene six, starts act two: Jo and Rana attempt to gain access to an area occupied by U.S. soldiers. There is no set required for *Falluja*. The walls, referenced in scene six, are the walls of the theatre, making the performance space into an inverted in-the-round configuration and flipping the location of the action of the play from “center” stage to its margins. The spectators are thus plunged *into* the heart of the city; *they* are waiting for the supplies Jo and Rana bring. The bullets are audible, part of the soundscape that, according to Holmes, “should. . . function to give the audience both a clear and a subliminal sense of what it is to be in Fallujah” during the siege (148). Depending on where in the theatre the speakers are placed, the bullets could be careening through, over, or around the spectators/citizens of Falluja.

Acts two, three, and four take place mainly inside or right outside of Falluja; spectators begin by embodying the citizens of the city, but, as the action progresses, their selves constantly shift. Whether the spectator's self is associatively civilian, Mujahedin, aid worker, witness, or U.S. soldier, inside the city, the spectator is always a tactician, never a strategist, as necessitated by the reality of the urban environment.

“The aggressive and survivalist *tactics* underpinning urban operations,” writes Hills, “have evolved reactively or pragmatically rather than as a result of technological or *conceptual* developments” (244, emphasis mine). The U.S. siege of Falluja, carrying with it the intent to control and pacify, imposes, in the form of soldier's bodies and weaponry, rational order on the city. In scene six, what should be a pedestrian access point to the city is remapped into a no man's land of gunfire. Jo and Rana, on foot, negotiate this borderzone. However, the militarized remapping is not strategically stable: it is dependant on tactical, spatial practices. The military

operation in scene six is not only predicated on un-making the original strategy of the city's roads, but, and more importantly, is also an operation whose goal, to arrest the motion of the urban fact, is always already futile.

The order of the strategized concept city is a "sieve order" which "is everywhere punched and torn open by" spatial practices and pedestrian acts. In Certeau's essay, these pedestrian acts resist power.

(T)he functionalist organization, by privileging progress, i.e. time, causes the conditions of its own possibility—space itself—to be forgotten: space thus becomes the blind spot in a scientific and political technology. . . (And) the (concept) city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power (107, 95).

Translated into an urban war zone, the pedestrian acts also *are* power/order: "brutal," "exhausting," and unstable. Because "blind spots" of space cease to exist on the street level, in urban warfare, a tactician is no longer in clear opposition, ideologically or politically, to a strategist. The exigencies of survival reduce everyone to the physical level of a pedestrian in "the closest the West comes to pre-industrial forms of conflict" (Hills, 237). Throughout the play, it is the soldiers' experiences that, ironically, most vehemently undercut the mediatized and militaristic disciplinary discourse surrounding the siege of Falluja.

In act one, the audience, acting as the CNN news-studio audience, hears the U.S. general, un-named and therefore a symbol of the authoritative management of the U.S. military, insist that the attack on Falluja will be planned, deliberate, orderly, an ideal of clean, effective military action. In reality, however, the complex multi-dimensionality of urban geography and existence renders the possibility of rational physical action impossible. The assault on Falluja, early in act two, is carried out in blackout, with only the sound of heavy metal music, "played very, very loudly. . .the sound of artillery and small arms fire" (Holmes, 175). Inherent in this scene are a series of gesticulations, in which "the thing," military action against Falluja, is "simultaneously recognized and made strange" (Pavis, 45). The spectators, robbed of their visual sense, experience an auditory iconography of chaos. The music is familiar, yet its associations are made strange because it is accompanied by the sound of war. Or the music accompanied by the sounds of war is familiar, because the U.S. soldiers

actually did play heavy metal music during the siege, but it is made strange because the spectators are not in a place of war, but in a theatre. Concurrently the clean military action envisioned by the U.S. general in the play is made strange as well; it is literally un-seeable. Finally, the spectators are made strange to themselves: are they Fallujan citizens or American soldiers? Victims or aggressors? Immediately following “the attack,” a U.S. sniper “materializes” from the audience and articulates the experience of the irrational urban space. “Fallujah is a sniper’s dream,” he says, “You can go *anywhere* and there are so many ways to fire at the enemy *without him knowing where you are*. It’s heaven.” (Holmes, 175; emphasis mine).

The U.S. military officials, throughout the play, attempt to construct the city and its operations as civil, while the experience of the soldiers expose it as anything but. Urban warfare, as Hills writes, reduces individual soldier-combatants to an essentialized Hunter-Killer mentality, an irrational methodology of “What I find, I can kill” (237). In act three of the play, a lieutenant briefs his men before the attack: “the intention is not to take the town of Falluja; our intent is to give the town back to the Fallujan people” (Holmes, 191). The targets are the terrorists, the “bad guys,” not the civilians. The attack, scene twenty-two, is staged, like the assault of scene eleven, with sound, but accompanied by the image of Sasha and a civilian cowering in terror. The attack is auditory: “Excruciating noise. . . gunshots, mortars, and machine gun fire. . . the aural gamut of a bombardment, though we see very little” (193). After, Sasha recounts what she saw. Families pulled out of their homes; women, children and men killed. The lieutenant re-enters: “When we hit the mosque, I thought we had killed all the bad guys, but when we went in they didn’t find any bad guys in the building” (194).

Urban military operations, writes Hills, “emphasize the intellectual and operational limitations of current military thought, decision making and logistics;” they are a “matter of tactics rather than strategy” (236, 243). The persistent disconnect between the voyeurs outside the city and the bodies inside it create a pattern of making and un-making that reaches a culmination in scene 23. Titled, “The Grunts,” a group of soldiers “mingle” with the audience, speaking half of the time with themselves and half of the time with the spectators. Their bodies, free to meander, signify their disorientation as they voice their contradictory, and actual, experiences of Falluja.

The fight lasted about eight hours. . . That day nothing went with the training. . . That day

it was just fucking everything. When we face women or injured that try to grasp their weapons, we just finish them off. . . The worst thing is to shoot one of them, then go help them. . . Shit, I didn't help any of them.

The spectators' role is not clear; they too, in response to the soldiers, gently move about the space, reconfiguring it in seemingly random patterns, but whether they are fellow combatants, interviewers, witnesses or civilians is not specified. The cacophony of soldiers' voices combine and recombine to challenge whatever judgment, of themselves or the soldiers, the audience might make.

What do people think happens when they tell us to assault a city? Marines don't shoot rainbows out of our asses. We fucking kill people. . . . At night you think about all the people you killed. It just never gets off your head. . . I mean, why the fuck us? . . . Some soldiers don't even sleep at night. . . We're angry at the generals who are making these decisions and who never hit the ground, and who don't get shot at or have to look at the bloody bodies and the burnt out bodies and the dead babies (Holmes, 194-8).

The real labor of war, the rending of human flesh and the destruction of human psyche, is articulated, and also borne, by those who are carrying it out.

The Material Cost: Urbicide/Genocide

Military, diplomatic and political discourse distances and sanitizes warfare from its very human cost, inserting phrases such as "collateral damage" in place of graphic descriptions of bodily destruction. Elaine Scarry points out that the objective of war is not a struggle for liberation nor a policy of pacification. Its structure is a contest of injuring and its object, fundamentally, is to kill people. Although this is startlingly self-evident, still the physical fact, and cost, of war "disappears from (the) view" of language. One can read historical accounts or listen to newscast narratives of war

without encountering the acknowledgement that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves (64).

Scarry is addressing the experience of war, in general, but her observations are particularly salient in regards to urban military operations. The objects, referenced by Scarry, destroyed include homes, religious buildings, hospitals, transportation systems, museums, roads and so on: strategic organizational institutions that, nonetheless, constitute the culture of the people in the city. Due to the topography of cities, in which man-made structures are imposed upon the natural geography and in which “non-combatants shape the battlefield” the violence of urban warfare, gunfire as well as exploding buildings, ricocheting shrapnel, broken windows, etc., results in a larger mass of destruction, a higher number of deaths, and more extreme injuries (Hills, 238).

Act two, scene six, referenced earlier, in which Jo and Rana attempt to enter Falluja with medical supplies in order to tend to the injured, sets into a motion two simultaneous strings of signifiers: images of ruined bodies in combination with images of destroyed infrastructure. These verbal codes wend through the play in graphic detail, bringing the reality of war in the city into the imagined, mimetically embodied, one on stage. In three different scenes, Rana describes injury and death from chemical weapons: bodies “colored green.”

Pieces of bombs exploded into large fires that burnt people’s skin even when water was dumped on them. People suffered so much from these, both civilians and fighters alike (Holmes, 170, 188).

One Iraqi doctor describes “survivors surrounded by the blood of their families” for hours; Sasha recounts dead “bodies eaten by dogs,” “a ten year old child with a bullet wound to the head” (194, 203). A soldier gives one of the most gruesome pictures:

For me, it’s like snapshot photos. Like pictures of maggots on tongues, babies with their heads on the ground, men with their heads halfway off and their eyes wide open and their mouths wide open. Blood all over. Do you know how much a body bleeds? Not even the fucking gulf could wash it off. . . the smells and the burning torsos (197).

Air strikes destroyed the city’s hospitals and, in act four, a doctor’s private office serves as a makeshift surgery, while a garage operates as another. There is no anesthetic and the bags of blood are in the refrigerator; the doctors warm them up by running them under hot water in the bathroom. The litany of injured bodies continues, here, as well:

a wound to the man's leg and his throat sliced open. . . . another man, most of his arm missing, a stump with bits sticking out . . . an old woman (with) an abdominal wound. . . the bed under her foot soaked with blood, a white flag still clutched in her hand (203-4).

Jo recounts the impossibility of negotiating the streets in an ambulance: U.S. soldiers and Mujahedin shooting at the vehicle while roads are rendered impassable. Ahrar, an Iraqi doctor, wishes he could "shower from the inside." He continues: "From the outside, it's easy. But how do we clean from the inside. In Islam, if we touch a dead body, even if we just see one, we should clean" (211). In the warzone, however, there is no time to clean between dozens of corpses; Ahrar's mind and body have been traumatized, but so has his spirituality.

In scene thirty, Sasha, at press conference in Baghdad recounts the damage in Falluja: 36,000 houses demolished, 9,000 shops, sixty-five mosques, sixty schools, the heritage library, government offices, one of two bridges, both train stations, two electricity stations, three water treatment plants, the sanitation system, the communication system. Seventy percent of the city, she says, is estimated as "bombed to the ground" (213). The U.S. general, immediately after, speaks to the cameras, assures the media that Falluja has been humane and lawful.

Falluja, for the U.S. general, is a sign of the War on Terror. The signifier "American contractors murdered," and signified, "terrorists in Falluja," combine to make Falluja the sign of a legitimate military target in liberatory war. Strategic discourse would sanitize ruined bodies and useless hospitals into "collateral damage," transforming humans into unfeeling objects and buildings into simple architecture. However, although the intention may be stated as "to give the city back to its people," the means of existence of those people is necessarily, in urban warfare, destroyed.

The targeting of a city in modern warfare has been termed urbicide. Because it annihilates a population of civilizations, it is also, argues Martin Shaw, a form of genocide where genocide is defined as an "illegitimate form of war in which an organized, armed group defines a largely unarmed population as its enemy, to be destroyed by force" (152). Looked at from this viewpoint, the signifier, "destroyed urban infrastructure," combined with the signified, "dead, injured civilians," make Falluja a sign not of legitimate warfare but of genocide. The play, then, removes what Scarry identifies as the 'moral ambiguity' of war from the siege of Falluja to replace it with the horrifying and completely amoral process of genocide. In other words,

Falluja shows, as Hills writes, that “urban warfare and Western notions of humanitarian war are irreconcilable, regardless of the technology used or the political rationale offered” (244).

Places of Somatic Obligation

“The past few days,” observed Madeleine Bunting after the March 2004 Madrid bombing, offer two alternatives of what the city might mean in the twenty first century: a place of terror where the stranger is to be feared and distrusted, or the determined solidarity of strangers – a sea of hands waving hastily scribbled messages with the one word that says everything, “No!” (Graham, 334).

I am suspicious of this binary; urbanized war does not support such a clean polarity. I want to conclude by celebrating the fact that, in *Falluja*, the audience is made into the city. The cost of the siege has been *our* cost, witnessed and metaphorically borne by *our* bodies. This is certainly, partially true, but I am haunted by Laura Edmondson’s recent essay in *TDR*, in which she challenges the unfettered and optimistic celebration of performance and creation (7-10). I do believe the play successfully materializes, de-sanitizes and historicizes war, but I am compelled to ask: to what end?

Falluja does not solve anything and it would be irresponsible of me to suggest otherwise. The cost of the siege of Falluja is not literally borne by the spectators nor the actors. But the play does destabilize, dramaturgically and in its *mise en scène*, the process by which meaning is made out of not only Falluja, but any city, any population and any war. Current U.S. rhetoric claims Falluja is now one of the safest places in Iraq. *Falluja* exposes this “safety” as a voyeuristic conceptualization that does not reflect, nor make up for, the daily life of the decimated population of the city. “Safety” has been purchased not by a libratory war, but by genocide. Documentary theatre usually focuses on the “mind and heart,” an ironic echo of U.S. foreign and military policy, where the spectator visually receives a presentation. *Falluja* obligates the spectators to somatically experience and participate in the presentation. The body, in its encounter with the world and with sensations, remembers that which the mind will not or cannot. In considering *Falluja*, where the bodies of spectators are implicated in the action, as a potentially activist script, I remain cautiously optimistic.

The play closes with Rice addressing a congregation in a U.S. Presbyterian church. She

thanks the Lord for protecting the US and coalition troops in the Middle East, as well as the “innocent Iraqis who suffer at the hands of . . . people who are trying to shake our will. . . God bless you all and God Bless America.” I hope, echoing in the minds of each spectator is the question asked by a U.S. soldier in scene twenty three, twenty pages earlier: “They (the generals) say ‘God bless us.’ Where the fuck did Jesus say it’s okay to kill people for your country?” (Holmes, 217-218; 197). Perhaps each and every spectator will join in a “sea of hands,” tacticians resisting the oppressions of strategic xenophobia, and say “No!”

[1] *Falluja* was performed in 2007 at the Truman Brewery on Brick Lane in London and also toured. See <http://www.unask.com/jonathanholmes/new/fallujahPage.html> for more details.

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